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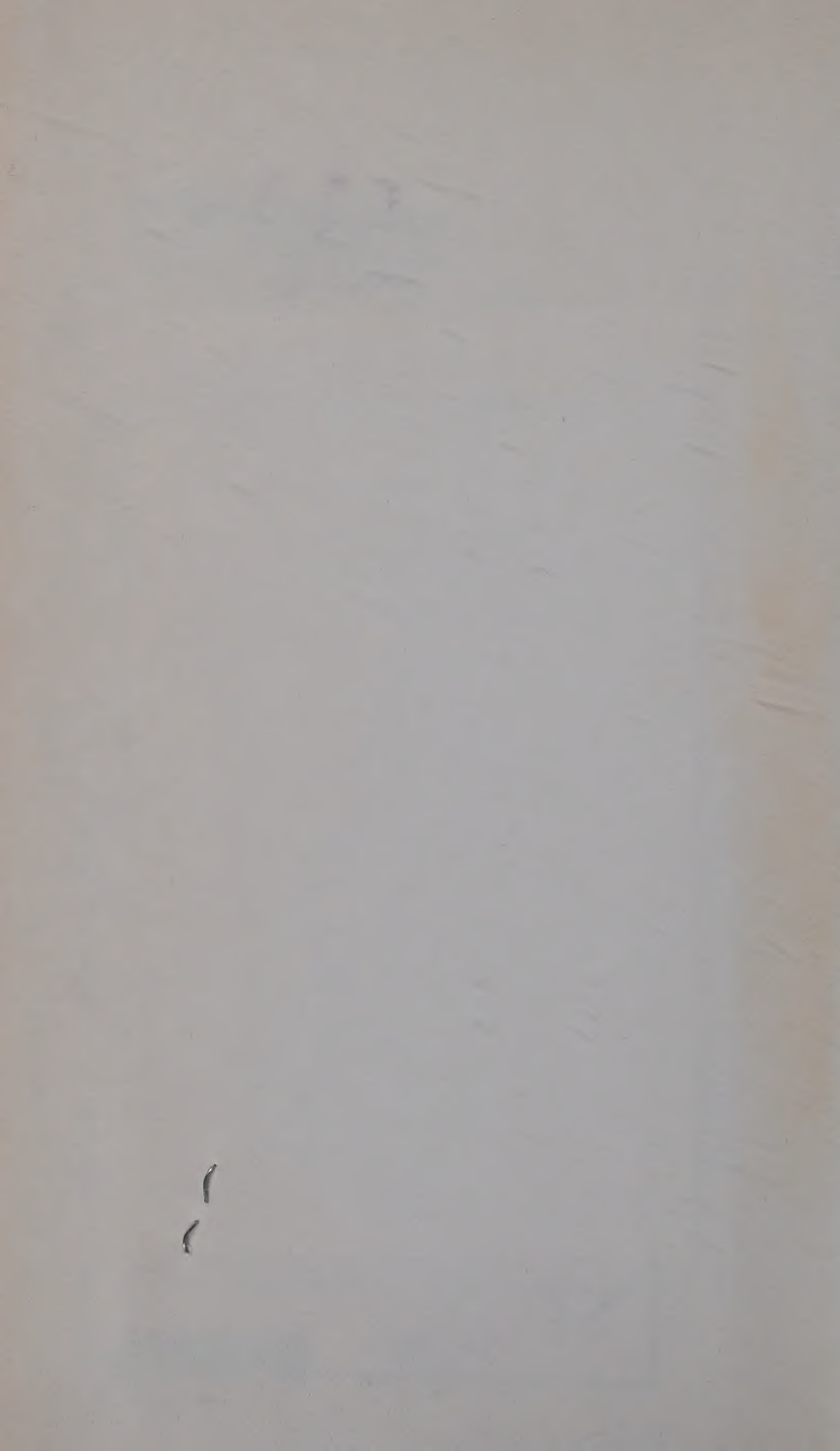
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WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

BIRDS OF MARSH AND MERE

AND HOW TO SHOOT THEM

BY

J. C. M. NICHOLS

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY
J. G. MILLAIS

Illustrated by the Author

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

IN these days, when sentimentality often overrides common sense, it is refreshing to find that there are a few devotees of a clean and high-class sport such as wildfowling. There is unfortunately a growing body of theorists who have neither the taste to engage in, nor the knowledge to criticize with fairness certain manly sports which are still conducted with a maximum of skill and a minimum of cruelty. Every day these ignorant but well-intentioned folk sit down to their beef and mutton for dinner with feelings of sanctity and composure, but if you ask them whether they have ever seen the animals which supply their daily food killed, the answer is in the negative. Furthermore, if you tell them that many of these animals are slaughtered with far greater cruelty than that inflicted by the shooter in obtaining his game, they are both shocked and surprised, and if they happen to be intelligent, let us hope it makes them think and enquire.

Wildfowling and big game hunting are without question the finest and manliest of all sports with gun and rifle, for they call forth all the courage, patience, endurance and intelligence a man may possess. After centuries of persecution ducks and geese have learned certain things about the man with the gun, and these clever birds, with a few of the waders, call for exceptional

qualities on the part of those who pursue them. Wildfowlers are the cream of all shooters, because the amount of the bag means nothing, whilst the quality of the sport is everything.

No man can hope to ensure success in wildfowling unless he is also a naturalist. The long road of experience is, however, a pleasant one, since the wildfowler is constantly battling with the primitive forces of Nature as well as witnessing and understanding her in her smiling scenes.

Contemplation is one of the greatest joys we have, and in admiring God's scheme of life we experience to the full one of His greatest gifts.

In this book Mr. J. C. M. Nichols tells the reader his experiences in the pursuit of wildfowl from the point of view of one who loves Nature and has no desire except to wage the legitimate battle of wits of man against bird. From these pages the tyro can learn much, since all the advice given in the pursuit of various species is sound and practical. The author tells of happy as well as unlucky days in their pursuit, and, as a man often gains most from his failures, he often imparts a hint to the less experienced as to what errors should be avoided.

To a sportsman of his calibre half a dozen wild geese shot under difficult circumstances are more enjoyable than a thousand pheasants at a battue; because there is no artificiality, and the individual must exercise his brains as well as his eyes.

Pheasant or grouse shooting, though requiring certain skill with the gun, are only sports for the lazy and the brainless, whilst the wildfowler

has to use his wits ; the former is a rich man's amusement, whereas the wildfowler, even if he is ever so poor, can find the best of sport in public places where any man can go. The chase of ducks and geese is altogether on a higher plane, because the individual has to rely solely on himself, and the best Englishmen, being self-reliant, like that best of all.

Mr. Nichols takes his readers to many of the wild places of England and Canada, where free sport can still be enjoyed at a moderate cost. If we read his chapter on the bird sanctuary in Holland, we see how he loves all the charming creatures that are to be found there in the nesting season.

Personally, I have shot and observed birds in all the wild spots of home and foreign lands described by the author, and can bear testimony to the truth of his descriptions, and in recommending this little book to wildfowlers and lovers of Nature, I can say no more than express a wish that it will find favour amongst those who prefer quality to quantity, and manly skill to artificiality.

It is fortunate, too, that the author is also an artist who can convey accurately to his reader the appearance of the various kinds of ducks, geese and waders as they are in Nature.

We should like to have seen more of his work in this line, and can only hope that the success of this book may induce him to give us more of his artistic skill.

J. G. MILLAIS.

Compton's Brow, Horsham.

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PREFACE

By the Author

IN the present volume, I have endeavoured to set down for the benefit of my fellow sportsmen some of the experiences gained in a series of wildfowling trips spread over the last twenty-five years.

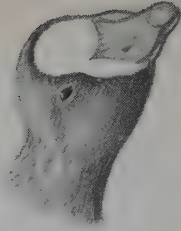
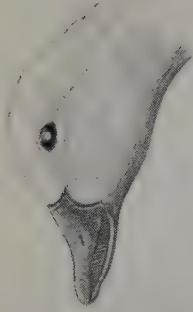
With this object in view I have refrained from borrowing or quoting from any standard authorities (however eminent), excepting only in the case of some two or three "record bags" which are mentioned with due acknowledgment of the sources of my information. To render my work more complete, I have included certain chapters on wildfowling guns and ammunition; also tables of loads and sizes of shot, which I have made every endeavour to bring up to date.

Of three separate chapters, portions, dealing respectively with curlew shooting, black-duck shooting, and a goose drive on the Severn, are taken from articles of mine which have already appeared in the columns of *Country Life* and the *Shooting Times*. To the Editors of these journals my acknowledgments are due.

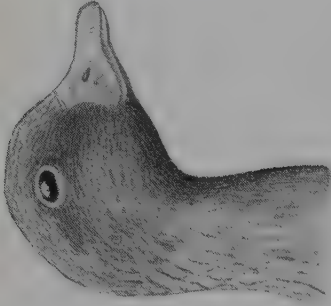
To Dr. Charles Heath, President of the Wild-

fowlers' Association, I am indebted for the opportunity of examining his collection of wildfowl guns, and to Mr. Donald Clegg for details of his record bag of wild geese. Last but not least, my thanks are due to Mr. J. G. Millais, for his kindness in writing the introduction to this book.

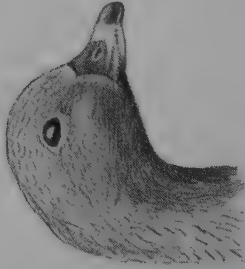
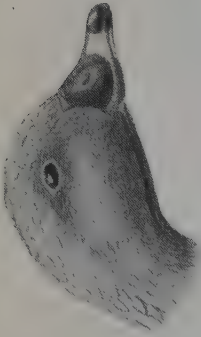
April, 1926.



Snow Goose
White-fronted Goose



Grey-lag
HEADS OF WILD GEESE



Bean Goose
Pink-footed Goose

Birds of Marsh and Mere

CHAPTER I

WILD GEESE

GREY-LAG—PINK-FOOTED GOOSE—BEAN GOOSE—WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE—DISTRIBUTION AND HABITS OF GEESE—BRENT AND BERNICLE GEESE—CANADIAN AND SNOW GEESE

IN the arrangement of my subject matter I have given the first place to the wild grey geese, the noblest birds that fly—associated for all time with the prowess of English archery, as recorded in many an old ballad :

“ Oh where be these bold Spaniards that make so brave
a boast oh !

They shall eat the grey goose feathers, but we will eat
the roast oh ! ”

There are many sportsmen (among whom I would include myself) to whom a wild goose stands apart in a class of its own ; so that a whole day's shooting at smaller game is counted well lost in exchange for a day after geese, even if the tangible reward is but a single bird.

As in some quarters there would still seem to be some uncertainty in the correct identification of our British grey geese, I shall commence with

a careful description of them. British wild geese can be divided into two well-defined groups, namely, grey geese and black geese; the first group consisting of the Grey-lag, White-fronted, Pink-footed, and Bean geese; and the second group of the Brent and Bernicle geese. To complete the list we must add to these the semi-wild Canadian geese and such rare occasional stragglers to this country as the Snow geese.

GREY-LAG GOOSE

The Grey-lag is easily the largest and heaviest of the grey geese.

It has the head and neck grey and plumage generally of a greyish ash colour, with the breast and belly rather lighter. Its eyes are brown and eyelids orange-yellow. The bill is a flesh-pink colour, with the base (behind the nostrils) orange-yellow; and the nail pink or white. The length of the bill is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The feet and legs are purplish pink and claws brown.

The weight of an average grey-lag is from 8 to 9 lbs., varying according to age and condition; but an old gander will sometimes scale as much as 10 lbs. or even more. It has a total length of 34 to 36 inches and a wing-spread of about 60 inches. The wings when folded do not reach beyond the tail.

Other notable points in this goose are the blue-grey colour of the rump, and the light pearly grey of the wing-buttocks; the last very noticeable in flight. Old geese often show a hard calloused knob on the wrist-joint of the wing.

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE

For its size the Pink-footed Goose has a shorter beak than any other of the grey geese. The nail is black at all ages, and the middle of the beak varies in colour from pale to bright pink (in young birds pinkish white). The base of the beak and nostrils are black, but in some old birds the pink colour extends right back to the corners of the mouth. The legs and feet vary from dull flesh colour to bright purplish pink. In young birds of the year these are dirty white with a faint pink tinge, or even a pale ochre yellow; but never the bright yellow or orange colour of the white-fronted and bean geese. The claws are brownish black at all ages.

In the pink-footed goose the folded wings extend beyond the tail. The usual weight is from $5\frac{1}{2}$ to 7 lbs., but I have bagged more than one old bird that weighed $7\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. and have heard of others still heavier. The total length is from 26 to 32 inches.

The pink-foot is the greyest-looking goose of them all. Seen at a little distance a flock will show almost as blue as wood-pigeons (whereas both the white-front and bean geese appear much darker).

An old pink-foot goose while living has a beautiful blue sheen or bloom on its feathers, which soon disappears after death.

BEAN GOOSE

The Bean Goose is a larger and heavier-built bird than the pink-foot, weighing from 6 to 8 lbs.

or even 9 lbs. In its general colouring it is much darker, and brown rather than grey. Its beak is comparatively long; the nail and base of it are black, and the centre orange yellow.

Occasionally the whole beak is yellow, with the exception of the nail and a spot or two round about the nostrils; and some naturalists have claimed these yellow-beaked bean geese to be considered a separate sub-species under the scientific name of *anser arvensis*.

WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

In this goose both eyes and eyelids are brown. The bill is pinkish white to rosy pink (brightest about the nostrils) having a faint tinge of yellow on the upper part, and the nail white or pink. The length of the bill is 2 inches. The feet and legs are orange-yellow and claws white. The White-front is a bird of rather slighter build than the pink-foot and in its general colouring darker and browner. Its usual weight is 5 to 6½ lbs. and length from 24 to 30 inches.

Old birds have a pure white forehead which contrasts handsomely with the dark brown of the head and neck. The breast is greyish white, more or less barred and streaked with black. Younger birds show less white on the forehead, and hardly any black marks on the breast. Young birds of the year show no white forehead or breast markings at all; also the nail of the bill is brown, the legs are dull yellow, and claws brown. I have known wildfowlers of some experience puzzled to give a name to these young white-

fronts, calling them bean geese or young grey-lags or what not. Adult white-fronts vary considerably in size, and also in colouring.

Both the grey-lag and pink-footed geese occasionally show black spots on the breast; and I have obtained several pink-footed geese and one bean goose with white foreheads. In neither species are the black breast-markings or white fronts ever as pronounced as in an adult white-fronted goose.

I have seen an old white-front with the lower part of the breast almost entirely black. Genuine colour varieties are very rare.

My brother Charles once shot a pink-footed goose with a large patch of white on its breast.

LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

This is a much smaller species than the last-named but similar in colouring. It has only been twice obtained in England. One specimen (a young male) was shot by Mr. Alfred Chapman on Fenham flats, Northumberland, in September, 1886, as related in *Bird Life of the Borders*, and another, an adult female, is recorded as shot on the Wash in January, 1901.

The Lesser White-front measures some 23 inches total length, and weighs about 4 lbs. The adult shows considerably more white on the forehead than the ordinary white-fronted goose (the white forehead extending back as far as a line drawn vertically through the eyes); and the eyelids are bright yellow, making a pronounced ring round the eyes. The wings are rather long in proportion

to the size of the bird, and when folded extend beyond the tail. Young birds of the year lack the white forehead of the adults, but the breast is mottled with black spots at all ages.

Distribution of Grey Geese.—Up to about thirty years ago the grey-lag was probably the least common of our wild geese, but in recent years the number that visits us has increased considerably. This is especially noticeable on the Solway marshes; and a few odd birds now turn up almost every winter in various parts of Norfolk, where not long ago they were almost unknown.

The grey-lag nests sparingly in some parts of the Scottish Highlands including the Hebrides. It is the only wild goose which has been known to nest in any part of the British Islands. According to tradition it used to nest in the Fen counties of England about two hundred years ago.

It is undoubtedly the ancestor of our common tame geese.

Whatever may have been the case in former years our commonest wild goose to-day, both in numbers and distribution, is certainly the pink-footed goose.

In their favourite haunts, such as the estuaries of the Humber, Severn, and Dee, in West Norfolk, and on the marshes of the Solway, these geese are to be found in thousands every winter, and year by year they seem to be extending their winter quarters to fresh localities.

In Norfolk, in addition to their ancient haunts near Holkham and Burnham, there are now some

thousands of geese which spend the winter on the marshes at Snettisham and Dersingham. Yet another winter settlement of the geese is in East Norfolk along the valleys of the Yare and Waveney, where only ten years ago a grey goose of any species was of the rarest occurrence; but of recent years (since 1918) the geese have come regularly to the fresh marshes west of Breydon Water, spending the night out on the Scroby sands, and flying to and fro right over the town of Yarmouth.

A south-west gale will push their line of flight out over the Caister sand-hills, but on the whole very few are shot. Three geese shot near Yarmouth on November 4th, 1923, were pink-feet (as are the bulk of these "Yarmouth" geese). About Christmas-time they are joined by a few white-fronts. During the last two or three seasons pink-footed geese have never been more numerous both on the Humber Estuary and the Solway marshes; and occasional parties have turned up in the marsh country of East Sussex, near Rye and Pevensey.

I am told that these geese are now established in some numbers on the marshes of the Ribble near Lytham (Lancs); but this is a fowling ground that I have not yet visited.

Next to the pink-foot in point of numbers comes the white-fronted goose. These are most numerous on the West Coast and particularly on the Severn estuary; but a few hundred white-fronts spend their winter in Norfolk in the same country as the pink-footed geese.

On the West Norfolk coast the pink-footed geese arrive in small flocks during the first week of October and sometimes earlier, and by the end of November they are present in their full numbers. On their first arrival they always fly inland to feed on "new layers," i.e., barley stubbles with clover growing up through them. Barley they love, and not until they have gleaned the last of the waste corn from the uplands do they make a move into the fresh marshes. After Christmas they will at times frequent fields of newly-sown wheat, where they do so much damage that the farmers are forced to employ boys to scare them off.

In this country I have never known wild geese of any kind to use a wheat stubble.

The white-fronted geese as a rule do not arrive in Norfolk much before Christmas. About the third week of February (or a little later as the case may be) the grey geese of all sorts leave the East Coast ; and by the end of the month there will be scarcely more than a score or two left.

In some seasons the pink-footed geese arrive early in great force and good bags have been made in October and November—when this is the case they often leave correspondingly early, say by the middle of January.

In the North and West they seem to stay a little later, and I have found a few geese on the Cheshire Dee right up to the end of March.

On the Severn nearly all the pink-footed geese clear off just before Christmas, and their place is filled (and more than filled) by thousands of

white-fronted geese. At Margam (near Swansea) the geese are mostly white-fronts, but on the Dee again the great majority are pink-feet, and the same holds good of the Solway marshes ; though here there are goodly numbers of grey-lags as well.

The true bean goose is now most certainly the scarcest of our grey geese (excepting of course that purely occasional straggler the lesser white-fronted goose). During the last twenty years I have never shot a bean goose myself, and I have only examined a single one in the flesh. This particular bird was hanging on a stall in Yarmouth market, and had been shot on Breydon Water (with several others) by a punt-gunner. I bought this goose and ate him (not realizing at the time that I had got a rare specimen). I wished afterwards that I had preserved his skin.

During the very hard winter of 1894-95, when tremendous bags of wildfowl were being made on some parts of the coast, I remember, as a school-boy at Charterhouse, seeing a hawker's cart loaded up with wildfowl of all sorts ; amongst them were five undeniable bean geese and one pink-foot. The former could be distinguished at a glance by their dark brownish colour and orange beaks and legs, while the solitary pink-foot looked as grey as a pigeon beside them. In the Dyke Road Museum at Brighton is a fine group of bean geese which were shot on the Hickling marshes by the late Mr. E. T. Booth. These were obtained in January, 1872.

Bean geese would appear to have a more

Eastern range than our other grey geese. Should we be favoured with a winter of exceptional severity, I should expect to hear of a few of these geese being obtained in different parts of this country, as hard weather on the Continent would presumably drive them further to the West. They are not uncommon in Holland.

It is not difficult to distinguish the different grey geese when on flight by their voices alone. The voice of the grey-lag is a sonorous long-drawn gaggle, the voice of a tame goose in fact ; that of the pink-foot is a short sharp " gag gag."

Compared to both of these the notes of the white-front are shriller and higher-pitched, from which it has been called the laughing goose. Concerning the voice of the bean goose I can make no statement.

Habits of Grey Geese.—All geese are day feeders, and it is their usual habit to make a flight into their feeding grounds (upland or marsh as the case may be) at day-break or soon after ; and unless previously disturbed, they do not leave these feeding-grounds till dusk, when they make a return flight out to their roosting place (some bare sand-bar out at sea, or other open expanse of water) where they feel safe. The only exception to their rule of fighting is during the period in each month when there are bright moonlight nights. Then all the geese, or a good proportion of them, will flight in to feed as the moon rises bright, and after having a good feed in the night-time, they will quite possibly make a flight out

on to the shore the next day, at low tide. It was suggested to me by an old gunner that the reason why geese come out on flight of an evening, and choose some desolate waste of shore for a roosting place, is that they are nervous of foxes and other enemies creeping on them in the dark, if they should stay on the fields or fresh marshes. By moonlight, of course, they can see quite well enough to take care of themselves.

It seems to me that this is an ingenious and simple theory which goes a long way to account for the habits and movements of wild geese which some people have considered inexplicable ; and I have noticed that green plover have similar habits in many places on the coast—namely that when the nights are dark they will all flight at dusk on to the salt marshes, but on moonlight nights they will not flight at all, but stay on the land.

Very well then, the morning flight of wild geese is obviously brought about by appetite for breakfast, the evening flight is "safety first," and lastly the occasional flight on to the shore in the day-time, when the moonlight nights are on, is to satisfy their craving for salt and sand to help digest their meal of the previous night. Tame geese like their wild relatives are exceedingly fond of sand, and will eat large quantities of it.

In West Norfolk the fighting habits of the pink-footed geese are most regular all through the winter, that is to say, after they have left off feeding on the upland farms, and have gone into their regular winter quarters on the fresh marshes.

Earlier in the season, however, their movements are more erratic, and after a good feed of barley in the morning, they will often make a midday flight on to the shore; in fact their movements for the first five or six weeks after their arrival cannot be counted on for certain.

In the winter of 1922 the geese stayed on the uplands till close on Christmas. I had never previously known them to be so late before they took to feeding on the marshes and got their "regular habits" as the local gunners put it.

On the Severn, the geese are much more governed in their times of flying by the state of the tide; doubtless the tremendously strong river current makes them dislike flying out until the ebb has left them a good dry stretch of sand to light on. In other localities, geese will generally flight strictly by time of daylight, and if their roosting place happens to be covered by the tide at flight time they will ride off on the sea or river, until the ebb gives them a chance to land. During exceptionally rough weather I have known pink-footed geese to land on the edge of the salt marshes, or even to shelter under the lee of the sand-hills. I can hardly imagine them "riding out" a really stiff gale at sea.

Grey geese, being grass feeders, are not so much affected by the prevalence of severe frost as some other wildfowl; but deep snow covering their feeding-grounds is another matter, and the effect of snow lasting for some days is to scatter the geese away from their usual haunts, doubtless to some milder part of the country.

All the geese that visit our shores nest in the far North, with the sole exception of the grey-lags, which are found nesting in Denmark, Sweden and Northern Germany, as well as in parts of the Scotch Highlands as already stated.

The pink-footed geese are said to nest in Iceland and Spitzbergen, and the white-front and bean geese, in Northern Siberia.

BRENT AND BERNICLE GESE

Now we come to the black geese (so called), namely the Brent and Bernicle. Both of these birds, like the grey geese, are day feeders, but whereas the Bernicles feed on sweet grass in the marshes, the Brent on the other hand feed exclusively along shore on the "wigeon-grass" (*Zostera*) and other marine weeds. Brent geese invariably spend the night at sea and flight on to their feeding grounds at day-break; but keeping out on the open muds, or swimming in the tide-ways, they naturally fall to being the punt-gunners' game. The shoulder-gunner will rarely have a chance at them, except during very stormy weather, and in some specially suitable locality.

Brent geese are chiefly found on the East Coast and may be met with locally in greater or less numbers from Fenham Flats near Holy Island right down the East and South-East Coast and along the Channel. Great numbers frequent the Essex coast in hard winters, especially the estuaries of the Blackwater and Crouch, and wonderful bags have been made there in years past by the

local punt-gunners. According to the evidence of the older gunners, they used to be very much more plentiful in the Wash than they are now; and certainly they have been scarce enough there in recent years.

In Chichester Harbour a few brent make their appearance in most winters; and at times in considerable numbers; but in mild seasons there is often hardly a goose to be seen.

Bernicle geese are very scarce visitors to our South and East Coasts; with the sole exception of certain of the Solway marshes I know of no localities in England where they are even tolerably numerous.

Both the black geese can be so easily distinguished from the rest (the Brent with his dark sooty-black upper parts and white stern, and the Bernicle with his white cheeks and black and white colouring generally) that I need hardly trouble to give a detailed description of them.

The arrival of Brent geese on our coasts in any considerable numbers seems to depend entirely on the weather conditions abroad; that is to say the prevalence of severe cold on the coasts of Holland and Denmark and in the Baltic.

In this respect they are unlike the grey geese, which are on the whole quite as numerous with us in the mildest of winters, and seem to time their arrival strictly by the calendar; while it often happens that Brent geese do not show up in force till the end of February or even the first week in March.

During the "war winter" of 1916-17, when

most of us were otherwise engaged than in the pursuit of wildfowl, there were thousands of Brent geese on the South Coast during the first fortnight of March, which of course was legally the close season.

The authorities of some counties were accordingly petitioned to allow a lengthening of the shooting season for that year, in the interests of our food supply, etc.; but by the time the oracle had worked, and permission had been given to shoot, the cold snap was over, and the Brent had all taken their departure.

A Brent goose will weigh from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to $4\frac{1}{2}$ lbs and a Bernicle about a pound heavier.

EGYPTIAN GOOSE

The Egyptian Goose is so commonly kept on our ponds and lakes as an ornamental waterfowl, that one may doubt its occurrence with us at all as a genuine wild bird.

RED-BREASTED GOOSE

This is a very rare straggler from Siberia and Russia. It has been recorded some six or eight times in this country. It could hardly be mistaken for any other species of goose. In size it is no larger than a smallish Brent. In its colour scheme it somewhat resembles the harlequin duck, its plumage being mostly greyish-black and its breast chestnut-red outlined off from the rest with white stripes. It is said to be very numerous in some parts of Russia and to nest in the valley of the Yenesei. Unmistakeable figures of this goose can

be found depicted in wildfowling scenes by the ancient Egyptians.

CANADA GOOSE

Canadian geese are found in a semi-wild state in several English counties.

In the Canadian North-West they are widely distributed.

In S. Saskatchewan they arrive from the North about the first week of October and frequent the wheat stubbles, choosing the largest and most open fields. A month later they take their departure further South to various parts of the U.S.A.

In West Norfolk, some hundreds of half-tame Canada geese are resident all the year round on Lord Leicester's marshes at Holkham. They often use the barley stubbles early in the season, like the pink-footed geese ; but later on they frequent the fresh marshes exclusively. They seldom or never make a flight out on to the shore, preferring to fly in to the lake in Holkham Park for a wash and a drink.

Canada geese are conspicuous by their black necks and white "cravats" and their great size. An old gander will weigh up to 14 lbs. or even more. I have never known these half-wild Canada geese to fly at any great height ; thirty yards is about the highest altitude they ever aspire to, and usually not more than twenty feet or so, though they travel at a wonderful pace for their size. In Canada they are a different proposition altogether and get up as high in the air as any other geese.

I have seen (in captivity) cross-breds between this bird and the China goose.

SNOW GEESE

From time to time occurrences of the Lesser Snow Goose have been reported on various parts of the coast (in Yorkshire, Northumberland and elsewhere) during the last ten or twelve years; but very few have been shot. This is not surprising, if we take into account the immense difficulty of securing a particular individual from amongst hundreds of other geese.

During the winter of 1908-9 two snow geese frequented the Holkham marshes for some weeks, one of which it may be presumed was shot, as during that time a snow goose (or the battered remains of one, past preservation) was found washed up by the sea near Blakeney Point. In the same locality a party of no less than five were seen in the autumn of 1912.

Adult snow geese can easily be distinguished from any other geese by their white colour and black flight feathers. They have the beak bright red deeply serrated with black, and with a white nail. The legs are light red, and claws black.

Young snow geese have the upper plumage mottled with blue-grey and brown, the under plumage white, and the beak and legs dark grey.

In North-West Canada the old and young birds are called respectively white and blue waveys. A snow goose was shot on the Solway near Castle Douglas in February, 1921, as recorded in the *Field*. It was described as a young bird.

In the winter of 1922 an alleged snow goose was seen for two or three weeks on the Holkham marshes in company with some pink-footed geese, but none of the local gunners succeeded in shooting it. I had an excellent view of this bird when flying with three grey geese, and I am inclined to think that it was not a snow goose at all, but a white "variety" pink-footed goose; as it appeared to be white all over, without a single dark feather. However, it is a true saying that what is hit is history and what is missed is mystery. The lesser snow goose weighs about $5\frac{1}{2}$ lbs.

The Greater Snow Goose has the same colour scheme as the last mentioned, but it is a much larger bird.

A fine example was shot at Belmullet, Co. Mayo, in 1886, which is now in my father's collection. This is a magnificent bird, and in the flesh must have weighed fully as much as the largest grey lag, say 10 lbs. at least.

Colouring apart, a snow goose in the hand can be easily distinguished from any other species of goose by the deeply serrated upper mandible.





J. C. M. Nicks

A FLIGHT OF WILD GEESE

CHAPTER II

WILD GOOSE SHOOTING

STALKING—DRIVING—A GOOSE DRIVE ON THE SEVERN

THE various methods of shooting wild geese with a shoulder gun may be summarized as follows : stalking, driving, shooting over decoys, flight-shooting (including shooting under the moon), and shooting from a sailing boat.

Stalking is rarely practicable. It is seldom that geese will pitch on ground where they can be stalked from the cover of a hedge or bank, though I have known rare instances when they have abandoned their usual caution in this respect and have allowed an easy approach.

It is sometimes possible to steal a march on them by wading up a marsh dyke, or again by drifting past them in a boat under cover of a mud-bank, and heavy shots have been obtained in this way.

The time-honoured device of employing a stalking horse, real or artificial, I have never tried on grey geese myself ; and in fact I doubt whether it would be found a very profitable undertaking, as they are shy of marshes which are heavily stocked with cattle.

However, I have known plovers and such-like birds bagged by the help of a live horse or cow ; and in N.W. Canada I have myself obtained

fair shots at the black-necked Canadian geese by the same means.

When stalking geese it is well to have the wind in your favour as much as you can manage, i.e., avoid approaching them down wind; though perhaps this is not so important with geese as it is with ducks and other fowl.

The story of an unsuccessful stalking enterprise, which I think deserved better luck, was told me by a farmer near Morecambe Bay.

A small party of geese had been frequenting his grazing marshes, and the old man conceived the idea of crawling to them with his head and shoulders covered up in a sheep-skin.

The plan promised well; but when within a few yards only of getting a fair shot, the warlike attitude of his own ram gave the show away, and the geese took flight. As he expressed it, "It was a sair peety and I didna get ma goose."

I once succeeded in walking right up to an immense gathering of pink-footed geese which must have numbered at least a thousand.

It was a Sunday morning, and as if fully aware of the Sabbath truce, the entire local stock of geese were collected together on a single fresh marsh of no great size, the approach to which was well covered by a turf wall.

No widely-scattered outposts gave the alarm, and, accompanied by my wife and dog, I was easily able to walk within twenty yards of the nearest geese. As our heads topped the bank the massed battalions craned their necks, but otherwise stood motionless for perhaps two seconds;

then with a mighty roar of wings they lifted "all of a mob," gradually sorting themselves out into separate strings and skeins as they took their departure.

It is seldom indeed that geese are to be found feeding or resting without some members of the party on outpost duty.

Some years ago a friend of mine was out on the Severn with a professional wildfowler named Purcell. Under cover of a steep mud-bank they successfully drifted down in the boat to within easy range of a large flock of pink-footed geese.

A broadside from their 8-bores as the flock lifted resulted in no less than thirteen geese gathered (some of them after a pretty strenuous cripple-chase).

This result by no means satisfied Mr. Purcell, who declared to me afterwards that if only my friend had fired at the necks of the geese, as they sat bunched, he could have pretty well filled the boat with them; a statement which I can readily believe. It must indeed have been the chance of a lifetime for a heavy shot.

Driving, where practicable, is an excellent way of shooting geese, especially if care has been taken to note their favourite line of flight after being disturbed at any particular time of the day, so that they may be as it were started on a flight of their own without too much pushing about.

Geese are heavy birds and cannot jump and mount into the air like ducks and smaller fowl, but must travel a good way before they can rise to any height; which makes them particularly

adaptable to a well-planned drive. If the drive is a long one and the geese have plenty of elbow room to rise in, you will find it hard to shift them any distance from their usual fighting line ; but of course if you can get them cornered in a small enclosure (which by the way you will hardly ever get the chance of doing) they can be hustled over the guns anyhow.

As a matter of wildfowling history, some wonderful bags of geese have been made by scientific driving on preserved land, such as Lord Leicester's marshes at Holkham in Norfolk, Margam moors near Swansea, and Lord Fitzhardinge's marshes on the Severn, near Berkeley.

At Holkham no goose shooting has been done on the marshes for a number of years.

Here, the record bag for one day (obtained by the late Lord Leicester in 1870) stands at 58 geese to five guns.

At Margam (to quote the late Sir R. Payne-Gallwey) the magnificent bag of 63 white-fronted geese in one day was made some thirty years ago by one gun only, a Mr. J. Fletcher. (This was in rough snowy weather, with several beaters to drive the geese.)

At Berkeley bags of from 40 to 50 geese in a day have been made by Lord Fitzhardinge's shooting parties.

It is a wonderful sight on the Berkeley marshes during a drive, to see the sky black with geese, and hear the roar of their wings when first put up by the beaters. Of course a goose drive on such a princely scale as this does not fall to the

lot of everyone ; but even where the forces of action consist of only one gun and one beater, a little drive will very often prove the best way of getting a goose or two into the bag. Remember that whatever the geese are ultimately persuaded to do, they will generally rise against the wind and then try to take their own line of flight ; and the great thing is to post the guns as near as possible to the geese without jumping them.

Geese, unlike most other birds, can be driven quite successfully against a pretty strong wind, particularly if they are headed on to a line they are naturally inclined to take ; and a good breeze blowing against them is all in favour of successful shooting, as it will keep them low.

When driven down wind they may come straight enough, but quite possibly too high for good shooting by the time they are over the guns.

I remember at one particular goose-drive a big lot of geese coming down wind well over the guns but far too high for effective shooting ; yet at the commencement of the drive they had headed the wind so obstinately as to fly right back against the beaters, and an old marshman was able to knock down two—stone dead—with a gun that looked hardly sound enough to kill a sparrow.

A large number of beaters is quite unnecessary ; in fact the fewer men you have out the better so long as the party is sufficient to keep the geese moving in the right direction.

Before commencing to drive a certain amount of careful stalking will often be necessary to enable guns and beaters to reach their proper positions

without alarming the geese. If the guns are unavoidably forced to move into their positions in sight of the geese, try the following manoeuvre : Let each gun be accompanied by another man who must continue walking quietly along to draw the attention of the geese, while the gun does a disappearing trick into some pre-arranged hiding place.

And now, " Mr. Gunner," a word as to your own position. If there is a hedge, bank or other natural cover that the geese are accustomed to fly over, well and good ; but if no cover is available then the only thing for you to do is to try the " prone position " and a little camouflage. You must lie flat on your back, your feet pointed a little to the right of where you expect the geese to appear, so as to get them on your left side ; because then you will be freer to swing your gun. Your clothes must of course be an inconspicuous colour ; your gun hidden, or the barrels previously dulled with grey or green paint, even your face may well be concealed as much as possible with a khaki handkerchief. If the ground is covered with snow your colour scheme must be spotless white (a white sheet completely covering the gunner might be a good dodge, and could be pushed down at the moment of taking the shot).

While the geese are coming on you must keep absolutely still, not even moving an eyelid till they are well within shot ; then dig your heels in, sit well up, and take your shot. It will often be found convenient to practise this lying position

when out fighting, etc. On preserved marshes where goose-driving is regularly practised, screens made of hurdles covered with reeds, grass, etc., are used to conceal the guns. They should be erected a good while before they are wanted, in order to give the geese time to get used to them ; but in many places properly made shooting-pits would be found to answer much better, as geese soon learn to steer clear of hurdles or marsh gateways after they have been shot at from any such cover.

Now if there is a very big lot of geese in the drive, and they are coming on in several bunches, it may pay well to let the first bunch or two fly right on over the guns without a shot being fired at all ; the other geese following will then hold on their line with great confidence ; whereas a shot at the leading bunch might have turned them back altogether and spoilt the drive. This is especially likely when geese are coming rather low against a head wind. Again if the first bunch comes high and you let them pass over without firing, you may be rewarded by the next little lot of geese giving you a lower shot. Of course this applies to fighting equally well, except that when fighting on public ground, you will probably be inclined for obvious reasons to take your chances as they come.

Goose driving is best done in the day-time, and morning for choice. A drive attempted in the afternoon will probably send all your geese off to sea or elsewhere. Should you find a flock of geese settled down in a field, when you have no one

with you to drive them, you may try the following dodge as a last resort (I am assuming that it is impossible to stalk the geese, and that there is no likelihood of their moving of their own accord) : You must get as close to the flock as you dare, taking advantage of any cover available, and then blaze off a cartridge over their heads. Now if, by luck or judgment, you have posted yourself on their natural line of retreat, you may have the whole crowd jump and fly right into you ; so be sure and load up quick for them. I have successfully worked this little surprise many a time, not only on geese but on ducks and wood pigeons, and in places where any attempt to continue stalking to within gunshot of the birds must have resulted in total failure. Of course, the plan is not always successful, but if you have but a good idea of how the birds will fly you should stand a fair chance of success, and if behind a hedge or other good cover you find yourself a little wide of your birds, you may be able to run and intercept the flock in time for a good shot.

Reload at once after firing ; a belated goose may be following on a long way after the main flock, and give you an easy chance.

I conclude this chapter with an account of a goose drive by moonlight.

Between Newnham and Sharpness the River Severn expands to a wide stretch of sands and mudflats (which are left bare at low water) about four miles long and nearly two miles wide, and bounded on the south by the celebrated Berkeley Marshes, which are the winter feeding-grounds of

thousands of grey geese, both pink-feet and white-fronted.

It was to a reach of the river conveniently adjacent to the Berkeley Marshes that we started off, on a bright February morning, our party consisting of myself, my brother Charles and our boatman Purcell, a professional wildfowler with an intimate knowledge of the river.

Our programme for the day was to row down with the tide to our shooting-grounds; make the boat fast under a steep mud bank, and wait for the geese or any other fowl to flight out on to the sands on the first of the ebb. Having reached our destination nothing much happened for about an hour; Charles dropped a wigeon out of a flock with a long shot from his 12-bore, and I had a shot at a mallard with my 10-bore but failed to score. We hardly saw any geese at all, except an odd three or four at some distance. All of a sudden we heard a volley of some dozen shots (and from heavy guns, too), fired on the fresh marshes, followed by a perfect roar of wings, and the sky in the middle distance was black with thousands of geese. Lord Fitzhardinge had started to drive the marshes, and the geese were in full flight for the sands and muds, which were now well exposed by the falling tide.

Some of the flocks appeared to top the river bank about fourteen feet high, but every flock unfortunately too wide of the boat, though the nearest was only just out of gun-shot. As we were well hidden, it was the purest bad luck. Soon the sands a quarter-mile off were brown

with massed battalions of geese, and after a fruitless wait for further flights in our first position, we decided to cross the channel on to the sands, hide ourselves in convenient gutters, and wait for the geese to start a return flight to their beloved fresh marshes. This we accordingly did, lying flat on our backs to get advantage of such meagre cover as we could from a gutter about eighteen inches deep. This time we were well in the line of flight; but the geese came so high that many flocks were right out of shot, and after an expenditure of eight or ten cartridges I had one goose only—a pretty high shot. The force of his fall had driven him right into the mud, but a dip in the river soon made him look presentable. Another goose had come down, which escaped into the deep water channel, and was only secured after a strenuous chase with the boat; which ended by Charles finishing him off with a final shot from my 10-bore.

The tide was flowing up-river again by now, and we decided to get home to tea. In the interval our professional man promised to organize a special drive for us that very night, which we thought would prove satisfactory. The moon and tide being favourable, we were to land on the mud-flats soon after the moon showed up, while a neighbour was to go and rouse the geese from some sand-banks further down the river, and it was hoped drive them over our position.

Charles and I had provided ourselves with long

white nightshirts and white caps, for in the moonlight the wet muds show almost as white as a snowfield. Digging a pit was useless, as it would have filled with mud and water, and any other sort of hide was equally impracticable; so we trusted entirely to our "protective coloration" scheme. I remember Purcell shaking his head doubtfully over Charles's weapon, a light 12-bore game gun. However, in the result the little gun scored off both of us, as will be seen.

It was a queer game altogether; the geese seemed to be everywhere, but the difficulty was to see them. The moon was in the third quarter, and a shimmer of starlight did not help matters. Anyhow, I must confess that my own contribution to the bag was one goose only. Our gunner had two or three, I forget which. Charles knocked down three with three separate shots, using his right barrel only each time; as he said, the flash from the first barrel blinded him for second-barrel shot. Then in pursuit of a winged goose he fell into a hole, and got his gun barrels full of mud; and of course several nice little bunches of geese flew all round him before he could get into working order again. With his last two shots he knocked down two more; four geese picked up out of five down—well done, the little gun.

So ended our goose-drive, which may be considered tolerably successful. At the same time, if future sport is to be considered it is doubtful policy to disturb geese after they have settled

down for the night and may scare them away from some particular haunt for days. The birds shot on this occasion were all white-fronted geese.





WHITE-FRONTS LIGHTING ON THE SHORE

CHAPTER III

WILD GOOSE SHOOTING (*continued*)

SHOOTING OVER DECOYS—HOW TO DIG A GUNNING PIT— ANECDOTE

THE use of decoys for any form of wildfowl shooting is a method very little practised in any part of England, but it is much used abroad, in Canada, the U.S.A. and elsewhere.

In North-West Canada the most killing way of shooting the big black-necked Canada geese is to build a little blind of corn-stooks in the middle of any big wheat stubble that the geese are using, and set out from a dozen to thirty or more decoys around your ambush. The decoys are made of flat tin, painted natural colours; sometimes these are supplemented by a live decoy or two; or dead geese may be used as soon as they are shot, their heads supported by ramming a small stick up the necks. As threshing from the stook is the common practice in North-West Canada, the wheat stooks are often left standing in the fields for a week or two, which is all in favour of sport.

In England, curiously enough, I have not found that geese take to decoys at all well on the whole. I have tried them in several parts of the country and at various times of the year, and my own experience is that geese, late in the season, and at any time when they have collected them-

selves into big flocks, do not bother to notice the decoys at all. Earlier in the season, soon after their arrival, pink-footed geese, if in small parties, sometimes decoy fairly well. If there are little lots of three or four to a dozen geese flying about, and you have a nice lot of decoys well set out, you should have a fair chance. If on the other hand some forty or fifty geese happen along, they will probably swerve in to join their supposed relatives, calling excitedly, and then, receiving no answering welcome from the decoys, will turn off again just out of shot ; that, at least, has been my own unfortunate experience.

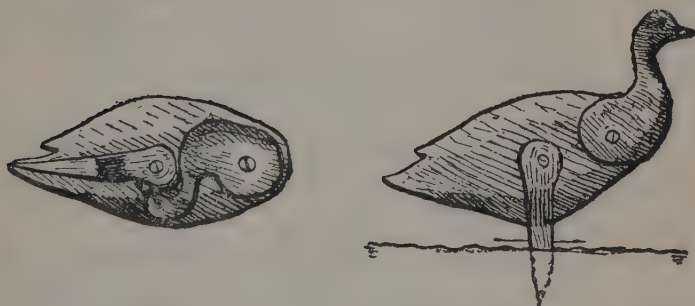
Lastly, should there be any single geese about they are almost certain to come in well as soon as ever they spot the decoys.

There would seem to be some days on which geese (and ducks too for that matter) will not look at decoys at all ; and yet on the following day a good bag will be made.

I used to make my own decoys for geese, cutting the bodies out of quarter-inch beech wood with a fret-saw, and the heads and necks out of sheet zinc ; the latter being jointed on to the body with a screw and a nut of turned box wood, a peg to set them up by being similarly jointed on. Thus I was able to fold away the heads, etc., of my decoys for packing purposes, and saved a good deal of space as compared with the American pattern decoy, in which the whole outline is cut out of one sheet of metal. However, making your own decoys is a good deal of trouble, and the flat tin decoys I have mentioned can be bought

from most gun-makers, and should serve their purpose well enough.

The decoys should be painted the exact colour of a goose but with this important difference, that the upper part of the body must be painted a very light grey, and along the under parts a deep brown shadow. This will give the appearance (at a little distance) of a rounded body instead of a flat one, a real plump solid goose; some camouflage, only the other way round!



By setting up your tin decoy in the open with a stuffed goose beside him for comparison, and then standing about fifty yards away to judge effect you will soon get the hang of it.

Stuffed geese would no doubt answer as well as or better than the flat decoys; but they are expensive, bulky, and easily damaged.

As grey geese are very shy of alighting near any cover (natural or artificial) that could possibly conceal a gunner, most of your shooting will be done from some sort of a pit, therefore I will now proceed to describe in detail how to make a proper shooting pit, either for lying or sitting in ;

which will be found most useful, not only for decoy work, but also when flighting in an exposed place.

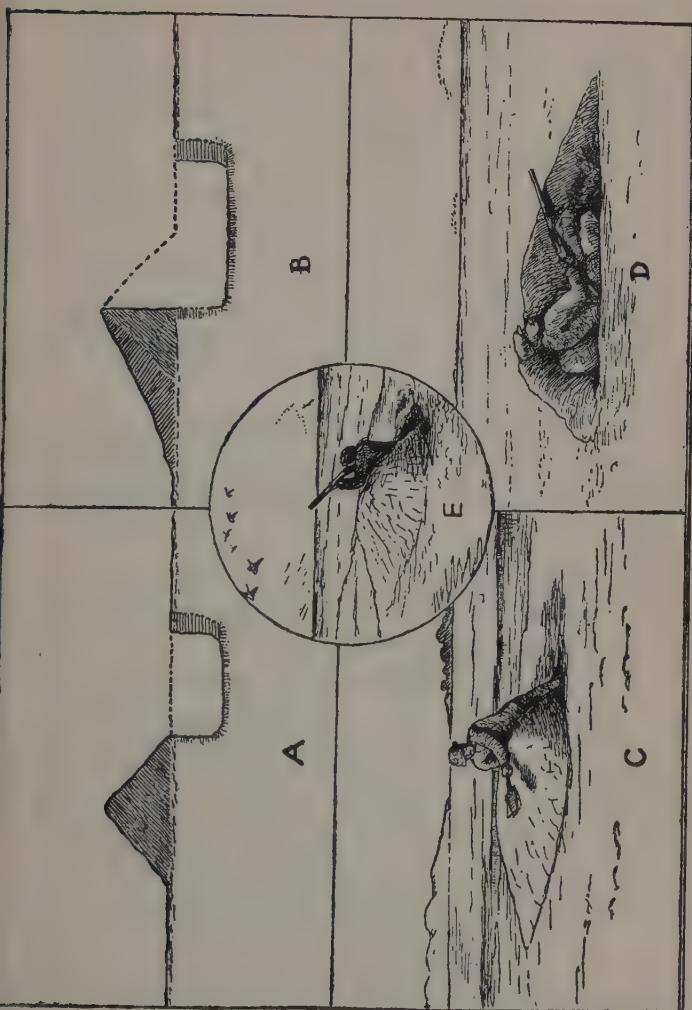
Some people when digging a shooting pit make a mighty excavation big enough to bury a donkey in, which gives away the show completely. Others go to the opposite extreme, and dig their pit so narrow and cramped that it is next to impossible to shoot decently from it.

I will engage to dig a pit on flat open sand, which shall give room enough for shooting in fair comfort, and which at the same time will be almost invisible at ten yards distance.

The following is the best method of digging a "lying" pit out on the open sands, where one cannot dig more than a foot deep, because of water rising :

Having selected the position for your pit, take your spade and trace a line of direction some seven feet long (I am assuming that your own height is six foot or thereabouts); this line you should direct at such an angle that when lying flat on your back your feet will point some degrees to the right of approaching birds. Now round this line trace a "coffin-shaped" outline, but only about two-thirds the width (inside) that you want the pit to be when finished. Proceed to dig out the sand to the requisite depth, and bank it up on the side you expect the fowl to come. (See illustration.) Note that if you commence by digging the pit to its full width you will have trouble with the sand caving in.

Next cut vertically down through the ridge of



METHOD OF DIGGING A LYING-PIT.

A. Sectional View—Commencement; B. Sectional View—Completed; C. Finishing Touches;
D. The Gunner in Position; E. Taking a shot.

your dump, widening the pit, as you do so, to a comfortable width for lying in, but still keeping it as narrow as you can for purposes of concealment, and spreading the sand you are digging out along the outward face of the dump. Lastly stand in the pit and smooth along the face of your dump with sweeps of the spade, until the whole outward side is perfectly smooth and without a mark, and is sloped up at a very gradual angle. If these instructions have been carefully followed, you should be able to stand a few yards away from the pit on its business side, and find it practically invisible.

The above is, of course, a one-sided pit.

If considered preferable for better concealment, both sides of the pit can be finished off with a sloping dump.

Be specially careful to avoid tramping about and treading in the edges of the pit, as on clean white sand every mark is visible.

Be careful, too, at all times to keep your gun-muzzle clear of sand. You will find a good armful of straw or marram grass, to lie on, will add wonderfully to the comfort of your pit, to say nothing of an oilskin sheet (as the sand is almost sure to be damp). Concealed in such a pit I have sometimes had shots at geese at under twenty yards range. I remember particularly two old cormorants flying within ten feet of me on the open sands (they had the fright of their lives when I sat up), and a curlew I could have touched with my gun barrels; while it is nothing out of the way to have little wading birds such as knot

and dotterel feeding happily within a yard or two of one. When shooting from a lying-pit it is best to let your birds get well within range, then sit up and take a good steady shot at them. To shoot as you lie is seldom successful, and should be avoided if you can manage it, besides which if you are using a heavy load you will feel the recoil severely.

Now for a "sitting" pit. Although it takes longer to make than the lying-pit as described above, a sitting-pit (where the ground admits of it) is more comfortable, and what is still more important it allows the gun to be swung with much greater freedom; and birds may be taken on either side of one (an almost impossible feat from a lying-pit). In several fowling resorts that I know, the remains of some old sea-wall, half washed away and broken down by the tide, provide the gunner with numerous "ideal sites" for a pit, and very often one is to be found almost ready made so that a little tidying up is all that is required to make a first-class "hide." Tufts of marram grass, seaweed, etc., can be used to finish off the edge of the pit and give it a natural appearance; but beware of anything that does not harmonize with its surroundings. The accompanying sketch will give the idea of a good sitting-pit better than I can describe it.

Where you have any choice, always avoid having a pit in such a position that your head shows on the sky-line. In places where a corner in a bank makes a natural shelter, or where spade-work of any sort is not welcomed, a good



WELL-PLANNED SITTING PIT.

A. Sectional View ; B. Position too Noticeable ; C. Position too cramped ; D. An Awkward Bank ; E. The same, but adapted to Comfortable Shooting Position.

dodge is to carry along a piece of wire netting about five foot wide with a light stake at each end. This can be set up around your hiding-place and a little grass, etc., woven into the netting will complete the hide.

Yet another plan for a more or less permanent pit (and the only possible method on soft wet muds, etc.) is to get a large barrel and sink it in some suitable spot, but if your barrel is liable to be covered at high-tide, you will have almost as much trouble baling it out, etc. as you would have had in digging a fresh pit.

It is sometimes useful, when working on a flowing tide, to dig two or three pits ; so that as you are driven out of the lowest pit by the incoming tide, you can retire to pit No. 2, and so on. The same applies to working on a falling tide, but here you are at the trouble of baling and partially redigging your pits as you recover them from the sea.

Capital sport can be obtained by shooting from a pit, as it can in no other way ; not only at geese in the day-time when they are using the sands, but at widgeon fighting on to the muds to feed by moonlight, and also at various wading birds.

For myself I can find few pleasanter ways of spending a fine day in September or October than in a snug shooting-pit. In September, with a favourable tide, a pretty little bag of curlew and plover can often be got. By far the best time of the month is when the tides are big, so that you may be sure to find the birds shifting about on the flow of the tide and also on the first of the ebb.

In October your bag of waders will probably

be smaller ; but if you are in a goose country, there is always the chance of a little party of grey geese happening along. Even when the bag is a light one there is, to me at least, a great charm about the whole business. The art and care with which you select your hiding-place or dig your pit, the varying colour of the muds as the tide comes up, and the calling of different shore birds, all help to keep you happy and amused ; while if sport has been brisk, and you have made a good bag of curlew, etc., or better still a nice little bunch of geese has come well in to your decoys (to lose maybe a couple of their number to a well-directed right and left), what better sport would you have ?

When shooting from a pit (and especially from a lying-pit), it is mistaken policy to use too heavy a gun. It is hardly possible to avoid altogether a cramped position, which prevents a heavy gun being swung with sufficient ease and freedom. Moreover, if you are well concealed and in luck's way, a good deal of your shooting may be at quite moderate ranges.

Select (for choice) a gun a little shorter and straighter in the stock than you would use for most other work ; or you will find yourself shooting under your birds. Apart from this you will find the short stock ever so much more manageable when you have a bunch of extra clothes on, which, believe me, you will find necessary for pit-work on a nippy morning.

The best time for decoy work is during the month of October, for choice selecting those days on which the tide falls low a little after midday.

You will then be able to make a start in reasonable time after having a comfortable breakfast, and get out on to the sands and properly dug in, before the geese are likely to put in an appearance. You may expect them to flight out from the upland fields about ten a.m. (or it may be an hour or two later according to the state of the tide) and at the same time you will have a chance of meeting with fresh arrivals from overseas which have just landed on the shore. At this time of the season the weather is often ideal for spending a day out on the sands. Indeed with a clear blue sky and the sunlight glittering on sea and sand flats, the conditions are the reverse of those usually associated with wildfowling ; so that I have on occasions been glad of a broad-brimmed hat and tinted spectacles to mitigate the strong light.

Later on in the season the weather conditions will be hardly so pleasant for pit-work ; as out on a dry sand bar the slightest breeze is sufficient to smother one with particles of grit. Moreover the geese, when once they have got into their "regular" fighting habits, will seldom make a trip out on to the shore during the day-time unless it is just for a day or two round about full moon when they have been feeding inland during the night. A little driving can sometimes be combined with pit-work, early in the season, by posting an assistant some distance along the shore, with instructions to show himself whenever a bunch of geese settles between him and the pit, and so push them along to the gun.

When shooting out on the open sands or muds

the colour scheme of your clothes should be for choice a shade lighter than the prevailing background ; otherwise any visible part of you will show up conspicuously dark.

An old lightish-coloured waterproof coat makes an excellent wrap on these occasions.

For the actual digging any old spade or shovel—provided it is flat—will serve well enough for sand or soft mud ; but should the ground be hard clay with stones, etc., such as an old “ sea wall,” the regulation Infantry intrenching tool will be found a handy little bit of iron to have about one, whether for excavating a pit or picking out a level stance on a sloping bank, etc. Attention to these little details makes a vast difference to one’s shooting powers.

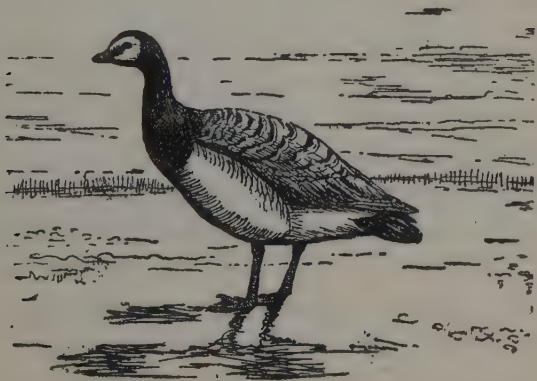
One October morning, Charles and I were preparing to try our luck with the decoys on the Holkham sands. Charles and Percy Barrett (a local professional gunner) were both busy with the spades completing the first pit, and to lose no time I had got the decoys all nicely set up ; when suddenly we noticed a little bunch of about a dozen geese heading straight for us. Barrett and Charles both hurled themselves into the half-finished pit ; I lay down where I was. On came the geese with stiff wings, as if to swoop down right at the decoys. However, the sight of two men trying to hide behind one another in a pit designed for one only was too much for them ; and they swerved off, just out of gun-shot, and departed. A day or two afterwards Charles shot two single geese over the decoys, one of which

I fully believe would have alighted right amongst them.

On another occasion I had the decoys out on a big barley stubble (for the grey geese), when a flock of Canada geese gave me a good right and left shot, which secured a couple.

Be careful how you use decoys on the shore when there are punt-gunners about. Mistakes can easily be made and a pound of big shot (fired at your decoys) whistling past your ears is unpleasant to say the least of it.

A young pink-foot goose shot during October is a bird worth bagging, as at that time they feed almost exclusively on barley and get very fat. Hang your goose for ten days or so, stuff with onions and roast tenderly, and you will find him as good a bird on the dinner table as "ever did fly." An old goose is a more doubtful proposition and he had better be made into "jugged hare" or otherwise humoured, or he will turn out a tough dainty.



CHAPTER IV

WILD GOOSE SHOOTING (*continued*)

FLIGHTING ON THE SHORE—MORNING AND EVENING
FLIGHT—FLIGHTING INLAND—A RECORD BAG—SHOOT-
ING UNDER THE MOON

I SUPPOSE that flighting is the most commonly practised method of shoulder-gun shooting all round our coasts ; and in many places it is the only way of getting a few shots at wildfowl. Flighting certainly has this advantage over the methods of shooting previously described, in that while stalking and driving will if persisted in soon drive the fowl away to find quieter quarters elsewhere, flighting on the other hand may be indulged in for many days in succession without breaking the "lead of the fowl." All the same, on ground where the shooting is free to the public, flighting is often most disappointing, as in fine weather the geese (and other fowl), taught by experience, make a habit of flying well out of range ; but on the other hand should the weather be rough and favourable for flighting, every owner of a gun in the neighbourhood will be out, some of them not only blazing away at everything that flies, in range or out of range, but crowding in on anyone who is getting any shooting with a view of sharing the bag. It is an old poaching dodge



A FLIGHT OVER THE SANDHILLS

to blaze off (range no matter) at a bunch of fowl coming well on to another gun and then run up and claim a share of any birds that have been shot. In short one is reminded of the old yarn of a sportsman setting out for a day's grouse shooting on a "free" moor who was asked by a friend if he had with him the right sort of dogs. "What dogs?" he enquired. "Why, a greyhound to retrieve your game and a bulldog for your personal protection," was the answer.

As already stated, it is the regular habit of all geese to flight morning and evening, with certain modifications during moonlight nights and so on.

To be successful at flight-shooting the most particular care must be taken to note the lines of flight taken by wildfowl, the time that they go on flight, and the effect upon these lines and times of flight, of the varying conditions of wind, weather and tide.

Only by the most patient study of local conditions can a fair average of success be obtained.

If you can avail yourself of the services of a really good professional wildfowler, you can profit by his experience; but in some places there are no men worth their salt as professionals, or you may find them a little shy of imparting too much information, and here it is up to you to hammer things out for yourself.

At morning flight, wind, tide, and weather all have their effect in varying the line and time of the fighting and also the height at which the geese will come in. Perhaps most important of

all is the effect of wind on the line of flight. With no wind at all, or with a fair wind, geese will, as a rule, take a pretty straight line for whatever point they are bound for ; but a strong wind *across* the line of flight will make a tremendous difference, and may be found to bend the flight-line a mile or two to one side or the other.

With half a gale of wind blowing across them, geese will often let themselves be carried a long way out of their line before beating up into the wind to make their original point.

Again, if the geese are starting on their morning flight from tidal water, the effect of the set of the tide must be well considered. If, for instance, the geese are washed off their feet by an early flood tide they may well be starting the flight a mile or two wide of their usual roosting-place.

On fine clear mornings they will almost always come in exceedingly high ; and in places where they have been much shot at, nothing but a gale of wind, blowing right against them, will keep them down within gun-shot.

A snow-storm or a thick fog has much the same effect as wind in causing the geese to fly low ; but on a thick foggy morning they will stick it out as late as they dare in hopes of the fog lifting. During such weather I have known them delay fighting until nearly ten in the morning.

A heavy snow-storm has a bewildering effect on geese, and they are very restless while the storm lasts, but blinding snow is a great handicap to the gunner as well. It is maddening to hear the air buzzing with ducks and geese, and not

to be able to see twenty yards away for the driving snowflakes.

In fine weather geese will come in regularly and in big lots.

In rough weather the flight as a rule lasts longer, as birds get more scattered and come straggling in, at intervals, and in smaller parties.

On the evening flight they are much more likely to gather themselves together into three or four huge massed flocks ; then, as if by signal, jump pretty well all at the same time.

For a few brief moments the sky will be blurred and streaked with their long skeins, a clash of goose music, a spattering of shots from the waiting gunners and the whole flight is over.

It should be remembered as regards the evening fighting that as soon as the moon begins to show of an evening (which in winter-time will be a day or two after the new moon) sport with the geese will begin to get uncertain for this reason, that they cannot be relied upon to come out on flight punctually at dusk. On the contrary, should there be a prospect of the slightest glimmer of moonlight the wily birds will sit tight in the fresh marshes and will not make a move until the moon sets ; which means that when they do come out they are hardly visible even at half a gun-shot. Even when there is no moon to show, bright starlight or a powdering of snow on the ground will sometimes encourage the geese to "stick it out" very late.

Many a fruitless hour have I spent waiting within perhaps a quarter of a mile of some hun-

dreds of geese, listening to their talking, and expecting them to jump and come out at any moment, while the last tinge of daylight has been fading out of the sky. Then I have waited patiently on for perhaps another hour, in darkness hardly relieved by the thin sickle of a new moon low on the horizon ; until finally the geese have come out low and straight enough, but only when the gathering darkness has assured them of perfect safety. (It is a safe rule to make for home as soon as the stars begin to show bright, for then you will hardly be able to see a goose though it be on the very end of your gun.) In just the same way too much dependence must not be placed on the morning flight towards the end of the lunar month, for if the moon shows bright and clear about an hour before dawn, the geese are apt to slip inland by its light to the consequent disappointment of gunners who have turned out for the regular morning flight.

As is only natural, the more the geese are harried and shot at, the greater their caution in respect of their times of fighting.

For the evening flight I prefer a fairly light gun and one that I can reload as quickly as possible. For the morning flight in calm weather when the geese are sure to come high a heavy gun is essential, unless indeed you are able to go right out on to the sands or muds and either " dig in " or lie comparatively close to where they have been resting for the night. Then it is a different matter, for with luck you may have a flock of geese jump from the sands within a few hundred yards of

where you are concealed, and having no distance to fly, they are not likely to rise to any great height before they are over you.

Of course this lying out on the sands can only be practised when the tides are favourable ; and on mornings when you cannot get on to the shore you will find yourself confined to some harbour wall or perhaps a line of sand-hills where in many places you will have plenty of company, and barring the specially favourable weather conditions already mentioned the geese will come in high enough to tax the power of your heaviest guns. By " digging in " on the sands for evening flight a shot or two may be got, but nothing is more likely to scare the geese from that particular resting-place. On the Dee, near Burton Point, in addition to the regular early morning flight, a second flight of geese and other fowl sometimes takes place right in the middle of the morning. This is brought about by the flow of the tide on the one or two days of the month when the biggest spring tides occur, all the fresh marshes being flooded and the geese accordingly persuaded to make a further move inland.

If the tide is a big one, backed up by a strong wind, a good flight is sure to take place, but if, on the contrary, the tide is held back by the wind, or is not quite big enough to flood the whole of the marsh, the waiting gunners have the mortification of seeing huge flocks of geese within a few hundred yards of them, massed together on the last islands left uncovered, and then when they are almost on tiptoe to fly, the tide starts

ebbing, the geese settle down again, and by degrees fly off in different flocks, and scatter over the marsh. A long bank called the Cop (the remains of an old land-reclaiming scheme) affords a dry standing-place and a certain amount of cover to the gunners.

In other wildfowling quarters, an occasional flight in the day-time may be caused by a sudden storm or change in the weather; a rare chance of making a bag. I will give an instance of two such day-time flights which I experienced some years ago at Wells.

It chanced one morning in early November that Charles and I, accompanied by Percy Barrett, had started off down the harbour in a boat. Our intention was to land on the East bar, dig ourselves in and set up our decoys there. I must explain that this was early in the season, before the geese had got into their regular fighting habits; and for some days past they had been flying out to sea of a morning and landing on the bar at half-ebb.

We had not got very far in the boat when a great black storm-cloud in the North and a sudden squall of rain and wind warned us that it would be no day for the bar. The geese evidently thought so too, for hardly had we rowed back and gained the shelter of the sand-hills (which stretch for some miles along the shore towards Holkham) when a regular flight began; flock after flock of geese rising from seaward and fighting over into the fresh marshes with a north-east gale behind them.

So black was the sky that some of the geese looked almost white against it! Not another gunner was out and we had the whole flight to ourselves. As each succeeding flock swept in further to the West we kept running and shooting and running on again to get shots at further flocks, until we reckoned we had run nearly a mile and knocked down between us at least ten geese. Of these three had fallen into a thick planting of Scotch firs which stretches all along the inside of the sand-hills. We had dropped four or five more into the sea, which was driving right up to the foot of the hills with the force of the gale, and two more on the open sand which were the only geese we gathered!

It was certainly a miserable bag for so rare an opportunity; yet I do not think that our shooting was so much amiss, and I know we had four down out of one bunch (a brace apiece). As it was we had no dog with us, our man was a mile away looking after the boat, and we were all the time on the move. I have since come to the conclusion that we certainly ought to have devoted a lot more time than we did (a whole day at least) to beachcombing and cripple hunting, and I do not doubt that with luck we should have gathered several more geese into the bag.

On another occasion (in January) I had been out for the morning flight and the geese had come in miles high (as usual). About nine o'clock, a furious snow-storm came on; my first impulse was to bolt in to breakfast, but instead I turned back towards the shore to see what would come

of it. It snowed so thickly that I could hardly see ten yards. Ducks and gold plover were flying about everywhere. The geese, which had all come in an hour or more earlier, got up out of the fresh marshes and went out on to the shore again. As it happened I did not get a shot at a goose at all, but managed to knock down a couple of ducks (during the thick of the storm) only one of which I could gather. Then when the storm was over all the geese came in again, flying high out of shot.

Than wild goose fighting, there is hardly any form of wildfowling in which success is more dependent upon favourable conditions of weather.

The geese may be present in thousands, but if fighting alone is the method of shooting available, without suitable weather the most cunning fowler is helpless ; and a week may be spent in strenuous endeavour, unrewarded by even a single bird.

Wind and plenty of it, from the right quarter, and at the right time, is what the goose flighter most earnestly desires. Tides and phases of the moon we can indeed reckon upon with certainty ; but in this changeable climate of ours we are always up against uncertainties in the shape of wind and weather, which cannot be foretold with any assurance for more than a day or so ahead. Thus the element of chance is always present.

A falling barometer accompanied by the wind "backing" is a pretty reliable warning of rough weather to come ; and the old saw "long fore-

told, long last " would appear to have some practical wisdom in it.

Even when the prevailing wind is from a desirable quarter and everything promises well for sport, a fertile source of disappointment is the frequency with which a gale of wind springing up over night will die down again just before dawn ; at the very time, that is, when the early-rising goose-shooter is hoping that it will blow its hardest.

It is surprising how strong the fighting instinct remains in wild geese that have been pinioned and partly tamed.

One morning I shot at the flight a single bird which was following in after the main flocks. It was flying at a fair height but appeared to be making heavy weather of the job.

A fellow-gunner, standing not far off, sung out, "What d' you shoot that old crow for?" I kept silent, feeling confident that I had got a goose of some sort. Judge of my surprise when on picking up my bird I discovered that it had little more than one wing to fly with, the other wing having been removed at the pinion joint.

I afterwards learnt that a neighbour, who kept several pinioned wild geese in his garden, had lost one of them a week or two previously, presumably the bird I had shot. Yet handicapped as it was, this goose, which by the way was a pink-foot, had made its escape and joined its relatives on the shore.

One of the best ways of shooting geese on the morning flight is to wait for them when they come to feed on the barley stubbles or newly-sown wheat

of some upland farm. When it is known for certain that the geese are fighting regularly day after day on to one particular field there is a very much better chance of sport than when shooting operations are confined to the ordinary long-shore fighting.

But even when the geese have a real good "saye" on, and the gunner has the ground all to himself, he must not imagine that he is sure of a soft job.

Wild geese are wild geese everywhere and there is a wonderful lot of elbow-room in a sixty or seventy acre "breck."

It is remarkable how geese seem always to pick out the largest available fields to feed on. They habitually flight in at a great height over the widest part of the field and the thinnest boundary hedge and, never relaxing their caution, studiously avoid corners of hedgerows, small straw stacks or any natural cover which might conceivably hide a gunner, until finally, when well out over the middle of the field and satisfied that they are in no danger, they plane down on to the ground and commence to feed.

In these circumstances a good plan is to dig a double-sided shooting-pit, well out in the open, in that part of the field which appears most favoured by the geese.

I need hardly say that the pit must be made as inconspicuous as can be contrived. It is best to complete digging the pit on the evening before shooting, taking care to carry away all superfluous earth, etc., and so leave nothing to catch the

attention and arouse the suspicions of the geese ; and, by the way, if it is intended to occupy the pit on more than one morning, when leaving it do not forget to hide it completely in some way or another ; for if once the geese get wise to the exact position of the pit, good-bye to further sport, at all events in that particular spot.

Now I will suppose that all the necessary preparations have been finished in good time, and that having turned out well before daybreak you are lying snugly hidden, waiting for the arrival of the first flock. On no account should you be in too great a hurry to start shooting, particularly at odd single geese, which are often the first to put in an appearance, as if exploring the ground ahead of the main flocks.

Remember that the geese will now be flying in to their favourite field with the full intention of alighting there for a square meal. Accordingly if they are coming in high with a fair wind, restrain yourself severely from taking long shots and outside chances (which you might be perfectly justified in trying for when out along the shore) and have patience to wait for a really good opportunity of scoring. By so doing you will most probably reap an ample reward when the geese, after passing over as if bound for the next parish, suddenly turn to head the wind and come shaling back again to give you a sure right and left at close range.

Of course there are mornings when owing to favourable weather (such as a strong head-wind or fog) the geese will come in quite low enough

over the boundary hedge, and on these occasions you may do as well or even better if hidden in the hedge itself, where you will have more freedom of movement than when shooting from a pit, and also be able to change position altogether from time to time, if need be.

However, it does not always pay to keep shifting from one spot to another more tempting.

I remember well a particular morning when the geese were coming in low against a stiff gale and indeed barely topping the hedges! Unfortunately they were flying in on rather a wide front; and as flock after flock swept in, first on one side of me and then on the other, I kept running up and down trying to get in a good shot. As fast as I moved to a fresh place, another lot of geese would come straight over the very spot I had left a moment before.

Now if I had only taken one or two companion guns with me on that occasion, we could have spread ourselves out and between us guarded a wide space of hedgerow, and I have no doubt that we should have shot a good bag of geese.

Supposing that a party of three or four guns are out together and the geese come in and pitch wide of them all; it may quite well be possible for one of the party to slip away and by making a detour to drive the geese to the other guns. Otherwise arrangements might be made beforehand for a beater or two to start at a given time and "bring in" some of the neighbouring fields in case any flocks have pitched there; thus

finishing off the morning's fighting with an impromptu drive.

I once bagged three geese with a game gun long after the proper morning flight was over, owing to the lucky chance of a threshing outfit coming across a neighbour's farm, and putting the geese back to me.

While on the subject of making up a party to shoot geese, let me add a final word of caution.

Beware of bringing out with you anyone (whether a novice at the game or otherwise) whom you cannot absolutely trust (*a*) to keep himself properly hidden when the geese are coming; (*b*) to shoot steadily and confine his shooting to fair and moderate ranges.

It is exasperating to the last degree to find oneself saddled with a companion who is always bobbing his head up and showing himself at the wrong time; or what is worse, blazing away cheerfully, shot after shot, at impossible ranges, not only effectively spoiling sport for the morning but helping to scare the geese off the ground altogether.

To conclude this chapter with a striking example of what can be done on the land under the most favourable conditions, I am permitted to give an account of a morning's goose shooting which I believe is, in its own way, a record.

A short time before Christmas, 1924, Mr. Donald Clegg, a farmer in Yorkshire, not far from the Humber, had noticed large numbers of pink-footed geese coming to feed on his farm at Eastoft.

The geese had been feeding regularly on a twelve

acre field which had been autumn sown with wheat after a potato crop.

Mr. Clegg turned out early on a rough stormy morning, and hid himself in a dry ditch alongside the wheatfield, having set up as decoys two dead geese which he had brought with him. To quote his own words "the geese kept coming in from all quarters and always seemed to finish up at the decoys."

When he had expended all his cartridges (fifty-five to give the exact number), Mr. Clegg knocked off for a well-earned breakfast; after which, with the help of three men, the geese were brought in and counted. The total was forty-three without counting the two decoy geese.

This splendid bag of geese was shot in three hours with a 12-bore gun (3-inch cases) and AA shot.

Three times only were two geese killed with a single cartridge, and a few rounds were expended on stopping winged birds, etc., which gives a most respectable average of kills for cartridges. Mr. Clegg further stated that during a goose-shooting experience of twenty-five years he had never before killed more than nine geese in one outing. Apart from the abundance of the geese and Mr. Clegg's undeniable skill with the gun, there are three points which I think should be noticed in the making of this remarkable bag: (i) The favourable weather; (ii) The comparatively small size of the field frequented by the geese; (iii) The excellent effect of the decoys, though only two in number.

Another form of flighting is shooting geese under the moon as they come in to feed.

This moonlight shooting is at most times chancy work, and when planning a short trip of a few days only, I have generally taken pains to avoid the moonlight nights and devote my attention to that time of the month when there is no moon, and the geese in consequence are flighting regularly both morning and evening. So many circumstances often combine to prevent a successful shoot under the moon. For instance, the weather may be stormy and the sky overcast with clouds, consequently the geese fail to turn up at the time expected ; on the other hand the nights may be very bright, with such a shimmer of stars that it is impossible to see them clearly, when they do come.

The best possible occasion is a fine night but with plenty of cloud drifting across the moon, so that the whole sky looks white like a snow-field. If you can manage to do so you should place yourself so as to get the geese between you and the moon. A favourable time of the month is a few days after full moon, when the moon rises about eight or nine o'clock of a winter's evening. The geese having gone out to their roosting-grounds on the usual evening flight at dusk (between four and five p.m. it may be) will then be most likely to flight in to feed as the moon rises. Now if you have made yourself wise as to the line they will probably take, or better still if you are in a position to lie in wait for them on their feeding grounds, stubble field or marsh as

the case may be, you may have a chance of some good sport which should on no account be missed.

If the geese have been unable to feed without being disturbed during the previous day they are the more likely to flight in early and keenly at moon-rise.

One thing which may be said in favour of this moonlight shooting is that the geese are likely to fly lower than they would in the day-time, so that a comparatively light gun can be used.

(Note.—Be sure to use a Nitro powder for this and all forms of night shooting.)

I was told some years ago by the late Mr. Alec Napier of Holkham how he made his record bag of geese.

For some weeks they had been using on a fresh marsh that had been newly sown, and were doing considerable damage to the young grass. Picking a suitable moonlight night he lay in wait for them, and shot eighteen, two nights later he went out and this time he bagged twenty-two; and the old marshman who helped him carry them home said he wished he had brought out a "hand cart" as he termed it. All these geese were shot with a 12-bore game gun and No. 3 shot.

At the first coming of a heavy snow-fall, and again after the thaw has set in and patches of green marsh are being uncovered, geese are very restless. At such times they keep flying to and fro in small parties, constantly changing their ground; and for a time good sport may be had with them by a gun or two ambushed on their feeding grounds.

As already stated in a previous chapter, deep and lasting snow will cause geese to shift their quarters altogether; nor will they return until the snow is partly gone.

When hard pressed by snow lying on their feeding-grounds, grey geese are never known to resort to the mud flats and salt marshes, like some other fowl under the same conditions; they go elsewhere and that is all.



CHAPTER V

SAILING TO FOWL

BRENT GEESE—SWANS AND SWAN SHOOTING

THERE is one more method of shooting geese, which is sailing to them in a small boat, or punt.

You will seldom get a shot at grey geese in this way, but a few brent can sometimes be bagged, to say nothing of sea-ducks. It not infrequently happens that birds which will not allow a gunning-punt to be worked within a hundred and fifty yards of them are so accustomed to seeing a sail at a distance, or so taken in by the speed of your approach, that with a fair wind and a boatman who knows his job, you succeed in "rushing" the birds and get in some good sporting shots.

For this sort of shooting a double 8- or 10-bore gun will be found most useful, or if you fancy it you can use a heavy single barrel (keeping a double 12-bore in reserve for shots at close range or polishing off cripples); moreover, as you will be working in the day-time with a fair amount of wind blowing, you can quite well use black powder in your big gun, without being bothered by the flame and smoke of it. Sailing to fowl is "anathema" to punt gunners, and it must be admitted that if fowl are much pushed about by this sort of shooting they will soon leave for a quieter neighbourhood.

Much bad feeling is caused by parties of "sportsmen" cruising about in yachts and motor launches, giving the fowl no rest, and firing at impossible ranges with rifles and all sorts of miscellaneous fire-arms. On the other hand there are plenty of places where there is no punt-gunning and where a reasonable amount of sailing to birds can be indulged in without spoiling anyone else's sport. Sailing to fowl is quite an art and as much (or more) depends on the skill of the man who is handling the boat as on the man behind the gun.

Punt-gunning apart, the above is almost the only way of getting a shot or two at brent geese. On account of their sea-going habits very few are obtained with a shoulder gun.

They are always reluctant to fly across land, but in places where their favourite feeding-grounds are only separated from the sea by a narrow strip of marsh or beach, there may be a chance at them on flight on a very rough morning. Again it may be possible to send out a boat to get round them, and by a little judicious manœuvring, persuade them to fly past a convenient point from which to get a shot with a heavy gun.

Amongst the birds which may be met with at sea and occasionally outmanœuvred by sailing tactics are the wild swans.

SWANS

We find three different species of swans on the British list, namely, the Mute Swan, the Whooper, and Bewick's Swan.

The Polish Swan so-called is now generally

considered to be merely an accidental variety of the Mute Swan, the cygnets being white at all ages instead of brownish grey as in all other swans.

The Mute swan is the common tame swan of our rivers and broads, and as these swans fly about all over the country when full-winged and find their way down to the coast, a good many get shot by shore gunners; particularly when inland waters are frozen up. Some naturalists have doubted the claim of the Mute swan to be considered a wild bird in this country; but as it is found in Denmark in a truly wild state, I think it is quite possible that some few of these swans that are met with in the winter-time may be genuine wild birds from overseas. I should expect a foreign Mute swan to weigh several pounds lighter than our home-bred birds.

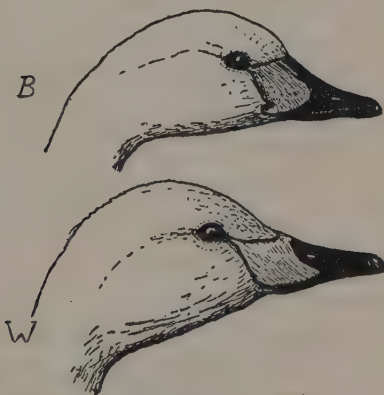
Both the Whooper and Bewick's swan are easily distinguished from the Mute swan by their long flat heads and the absence of a knob on the base of the beak.

In the Mute swan the beak varies in colour from pink to orange, with a black nail and a prominent black knob on the base of the beak, largest in cock birds. In the wild swans the lower half of the beak and nail are completely black; at the base of the beak is a big patch of bright lemon-yellow colour running back towards the eyes. This yellow patch is much larger in the Whooper than in the Bewick.

A Whooper swan will weigh from 20 to 25 lbs. and a Bewick's swan from 10 to 17 lbs., while a big tame swan has been known to scale as much

as 35 lbs. All swans are found to vary much in size and weight.

The notes uttered by wild swans are a soft piping whistle. I have never heard a tame swan make a sound, except a sharp snoring sort of hiss from the cock bird when angry. Both wild and tame swans are sometimes found with their heads and necks stained a bright rust colour; this I fancy is purely artificial, and comes from feeding in fresh water lakes, etc., where there is some



colouring matter in the water, iron, possibly, or peat. I have noticed the same stain on the breasts of both mallard and white-fronted geese.

A few wild swans turn up on the East Coast every winter, generally in January or February, their arrival usually coinciding with a little sharp weather, and as a rule they are here to-day and gone to-morrow. In Norfolk, Hickling Broad and Breydon Water are likely places for them. I have several times seen wild swans on the Solway;

they have been known to pitch on Monkhill Lough, a smallish fresh-water lake near Burgh. The Whooper is much the commonest wild swan on the East Coast, whereas the " Bewick " appears to be more frequent in the North-West.

The largest number of swans that I ever saw in one day was at Wells. It was a bitterly cold snowy day in January and swans were flying along the edge of the sea from time to time all the morning in flocks of a dozen to twenty or thirty in a flock, whistling as they flew ; altogether we must have seen some hundreds of them.

Swans are day-feeders and when on salt water their movements are largely governed by the tide. As to actual shooting much that could be written about shooting geese will apply to swans. Of course they are huge birds and take a lot of knocking down. To kill a swan neatly he must be shot through the head and neck.

Swans always head the wind to rise, and thresh along the top of the water a good way before they can lift themselves clear ; a number of them rising together make a tremendous noise.

When found in flocks swans are fairly unapproachable, but a single bird will sometimes behave in an unaccountably stupid manner and fly straight into an unconcealed gunner if only he will keep perfectly still. I was standing on top of a sand-hill one morning, having a look round, when a big Whooper swan flew within twenty feet of me. I could distinctly see his eyes and the big lemon-yellow patch on his beak.

On another occasion we had been out shooting

black ducks off Hunstanton ; and as we started to row home, we put up a big swan, which flew back straight on to our companion boat and was shot at very close range.

If a single swan crosses almost out of range you can sometimes turn him on to another gun, by firing a shot a long way in front of him ; or he may swing back with the wind and actually give you a shot for your left barrel. The same dodge may be tried with geese when beating up low against the wind.

I never tried to eat a swan except once and that was a "Bewick" shot on Breydon Water. It was like tough tasteless beef, but perhaps on this occasion the cook was to blame.





FLOCK OF GEESE (AS SEEN DIRECTLY OVERHEAD).

CHAPTER VI

HOW TO SHOOT A GOOSE

APPROACHING SHOTS, ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF—SINGLE GEESE

GEESE are wonderfully tough, strong birds ; their size alone makes it easy to misjudge their distance and the pace at which they are flying.

True, when rising from the ground or fighting their way against a strong head wind, they are unable to get up much speed ; but when once well started with a fair wind behind them, the rate at which they can travel is terrific, and will compare favourably with that of smaller and apparently more active fowl.

A lot of rare old nonsense has been talked and written about shot glancing off the “steely” feathers of geese (and ducks too !), especially in the case of an approaching shot ; and the sportsman has been accordingly advised to let his bird pass, and then shoot it up the tail—or words to that effect—a practice unsporting, and in the long run unprofitable too.

Unsporting, because though you may not always kill your bird you are almost certain to wound him ; unprofitable, because by the time you have waited to make sure (as you think) of a passing shot, you have, perhaps, lost the chance of a good right and left.

Any on-coming bird is presenting his most vulnerable parts (head and neck) to your shot, going away he presents his tail-end, a wounding chance only at long range, while if at fairly close range all the feathers he has got, breast on or no, will not prevent a well-directed shot-charge from doing its business.

This reminds me of a little episode of my earlier wildfowling, which I think is a pretty good sample of precept combined with practice.

One evening, just before flight-time, I had been having a little "gaff" with two old gunners, both of whom enlarged on the folly—nay the absolute futility—of trying to shoot an "approaching" goose. Well, hardly had I taken up my position for the flight and with my friends still standing close, one on each side, when a couple of geese jumped up out of the fresh marshes and came flying straight for my position. Mindful of the advice I had just been given, I was waiting to let them fly well into me, when (while both birds were a good fifty yards in front) bang goes a gun on each side of me and down come the two geese!

"I ha' shot one," sings out one old boy as he joyfully trots in to gather his goose, and "I ha' shot t'other," echoes the other, and I—well I didn't say a word, but believe me, I thought quite a lot. Let me add that all three of us were armed with ordinary 12-bore guns.

One more instance. Two consecutive shots at single geese which I had within the space of a few minutes, when shooting with a $2\frac{3}{4}$ case 12-

bore. The first was at a fine old goose flying at a medium height and straight towards me; being a bit eager I took him a long way in front, and at the shot he fell like a stone. When I walked out into the marsh to pick him up I found him a good forty-five yards in front of where I had been standing; two or three pellets of BB shot had caught him fairly on the breast and driven right through him. He was a big dark-coloured goose, for a pink-foot, and weighed $7\frac{1}{2}$ lbs., one of the heaviest I have ever shot.

Goose No. 2 was quite a different proposition. He came flying out over a little belt of fir-trees, at no height at all, like a driven partridge; owing to an intercepting tree I could not shoot until he had passed me, and then got a straight-away shot at twenty-five to thirty yards. Both barrels seemed to strike him fair, but he never faltered until he had flown at least two hundred yards, when round he came in a wide sweep and flopped down into the sandhills. We walked him up and secured him without another shot. Like the first goose, two or three shot pellets had driven clean through him, but being shot from behind he had been able to fly a considerable distance before he collapsed; and had the light been bad we might have lost him.

Note.—Always if possible keep your eyes on a bird you have fired at, it may seem unhurt, yet carry on a long way and then drop dead.

Of course, if geese are coming well into you, it is foolish to fire before they are within fair range; I have only narrated these particular

incidents to show that a single oncoming goose can be killed handsomely in front of the gun, just as well as any other game.

Perhaps the only time when it is the soundest plan to let your birds get a little past you before shooting, is when you have a bunch of geese beating into you against a strong head-wind.

Now, should you take your shot at any distance in front, you may chance to kill your first bird all right ; but the rest are able to check themselves with a single effort of their strong wings, and go aback so smartly with the wind that you will find it exceedingly hard to score a kill with the second barrel.

Once past the gun, however, the wind will hold them ; and, if they try to turn back at your first shot, they will then be fairly on top of you.

There is but one other disadvantage that I know of in taking an approaching bird well in front of you, which is the risk (remote I grant, but still quite possible) of being knocked over by your first bird, just as you are turning to take your second shot at another.

Small birds do not matter, but from time to time we hear of men being completely knocked out of time by a falling pheasant or grouse. I certainly should not care to experience what it would feel like to have a big goose drop on to me ; I fancy that I should be very effectively sand-bagged.

I once had a pretty narrow escape that way, when a dead goose I had shot landed on top of a fence within a foot or two of my head. This

bird was flying with the wind and was broken literally in two by the force it was falling ; but it was not killed at any great height.

I am convinced that feathers only can do very little to stop the shot at any fair range ; but a pellet of shot striking a goose on the breast has got to penetrate not only the breast-feathers, but breast-muscle and bone, before a vital part is reached ; and therefore fairly large shot should be used.

The vitality of geese, even when shot clean through with big shot, is amazing. A goose that is hit through the lungs will travel a good way, and then tower to a tremendous height before falling dead.

A goose that is flying rather low, and giving a flanking shot will present a very favourable angle for shot penetration, and a single lucky pellet catching him in the hollow under the wing will drive clean through him at a long range ; because at this angle there are no big bones for the shot to penetrate before reaching a vital part.

However, it would be hardly practical to wait and let a goose fly past you on the off-chance of being able to catch him at this particular angle.

Never deliberately try to kill more than one bird at a shot ; but if two are flying close together and you make a good shot at one, you may get his companion thrown into the bargain. A wounded goose is best dispatched by hitting him a sharp blow across the neck with a stick ; or you can drive the blade of a penknife through the base of the skull into the brain.

A winged goose can get away at a pretty fair pace ; but if you make to go past him in the open, he will generally squat down flat with his neck stretched out, and allow himself to be picked up without further movement.

Brent geese are easier to kill than grey geese, being smaller and lighter built ; they can be stopped at pretty long range with No. 2 or No. 3 shot.

At flight time you may often see a single goose, or perhaps a pair, coming in twenty minutes ahead of the main flight ; they make a grand tour of inspection round the ground they intend to pitch on, and then return to their own flocks and report " all clear " before the flight begins : in fact, I am quite sure they are " ground scouts," and nothing else.

These old boys often fly much lower than the big flocks, and when so doing will come straight in without a sound.

On the other hand, " pensioners," i.e., pricked geese that have left the flocks, will come straggling in last of all. If you have the country to yourself it may be as well to let the " ground scouts " alone, but if they have spotted you, or there are other gunners about it is best to " mak siccar," and bag them if you have a chance.

When flying in their regular V-shaped formation the leading goose at the apex of the V is always the biggest goose of the flock ; so if you want a good old bird for a specimen, shoot the leader, but if a young one for eating is preferred, pick one of the hindmost.

I have sometimes seen the leading goose, of a big flight, fall out of the ranks, give up his place to his second in command and fly serrefile for a while.



CHAPTER VII

WILDFOWLING GUNS

CHOICE OF A GUN—LARGE AND SMALL BORES—ANCIENT
HISTORY—CARE OF GUNS—SECOND-HAND GUNS

IN choosing a wildfowl gun, consideration must be given to the sort of shooting in prospect. If there is much walking to be done, especially on soft boggy marshland, very few men can make a satisfactory performance with a heavy 8- or 10-bore. On the other hand if it is all boat work, with little or no walking in prospect, a heavy gun can very well be taken if desired. Many men start wildfowling with wonderful expectations of what they are going to accomplish with a large-bore gun. They not only expect to kill at almost any range, but they seem to think that the spread of a big gun is so wide as to swamp any little errors of allowance on birds, and so on. The facts of the case are very different.

To shoot well with a heavy gun is very much harder than to put up quite a decent performance with a game gun. At close or moderate ranges most big guns, having a considerable amount of choke, throw quite as narrow a pattern as a 12-bore game gun, while at long ranges the extra weight of the large-bore gun makes it difficult for a novice at the game to give the necessary amount of lead to fast-flying birds.



DEAD IN THE AIR

A consideration of equal importance is the particular sort of wildfowl you are in pursuit of, and the range at which you expect to do most of your shooting. Goose shooting as a rule is long-range work, and therefore you will naturally select for it as heavy a gun as you can manage. For ducks a heavy or light gun according to circumstances. For plovers and small birds a game gun is always the best, unless you are ambitious to bring off a heavy shot at a flock, or are desirous of getting as much practice as you can with your heavy gun.

But perhaps most important of all is the "personal equation," by which I mean not only physical ability but individual preference in the use of such and such a gun. There are some men who love a big gun for its own sake and are never happier than when trying their favourite 8- or 10-bore at all ranges and on all sorts of birds.

Others again prefer light guns and have no use at all for the heavier artillery. I suppose the average man desires to use on different occasions the particular guns which will give him the maximum chance of making a good bag, and doing some creditable shooting.

After thinking over the experiences of a good many seasons' shooting, I must say that I have very seldom seen anything accomplished with an 8-bore in the way of long-range shooting that could not have been equally well done with a good 10-bore.

Again, I have seen geese missed at close range

with an 8-bore which should have been easily bagged with a much lighter gun ; and for many forms of goose shooting, there is much to be said in favour of such as, for instance, a long case 12-bore.

No one should expect to be able to make satisfactory shooting right away with a heavy large-bore gun ; a certain amount of practice is therefore necessary. Surely it is hardly reasonable to keep a heavy gun stowed away in its case for practically the whole season, and then, on bringing it out for some special day at geese, to expect to make first class practice with it (and that however well you may have been shooting with a game gun, under absolutely different conditions). On the contrary, if you are determined to do your best with the heavy gun, you should take every opportunity of getting practice-shooting with it, at all ranges, and at all sorts of game.

For years I did the greater part of my wild-fowl shooting with a 10-bore gun by J. W. Tolley, taking the long $3\frac{1}{4}$ paper cases. With this gun, before the goose shooting season began, I used to get as much practice as ever I could, at curlews, pigeons, and every sort of wild game from a hare down to a snipe.

I also got some good ideas of long range work by shooting a few great black-backed gulls from a pit on the sands. These powerful gulls are really vermin of the worst sort, as keepers of grouse-moors can testify. They rarely fly within range of an ordinary 12-bore ; but I found that with the

10-bore and a good dose of No. 1 shot, I could crumple them up stone dead up to sixty yards.

Cormorants also are destructive birds ; so much so that in many places a reward is offered for their heads. They fly at a good pace, are exceedingly tough to kill, and in short afford good practice for an aspiring goose shot.

However, in spite of having made excellent practice with the 10-bore on many occasions, and at times bringing down geese which could have been reached with no smaller gun, I am convinced that I should have done equally well (taking one day with another) with a long case 12-bore.

8- and 10-bore guns are usually fitted with a rubber heel-plate, which is an excellent thing to absorb the recoil.

It is as well to have them stocked a trifle shorter than a game gun, or you will find the rubber apt to catch on your shoulder ; particularly when you have a lot of thick clothes on. I have often found a humble push-bike very useful for carting about a heavy gun. You can either sling the whole gun across your shoulders with a gun-sling ; or else wrap the barrels and fore-end (well padded) in a cloth cover and tie them securely along the top of the diamond frame, carrying the stock in a bag over your shoulder. The last is much the safest way, in case you should meet with a side-slip or any other mishap ; besides relieving your shoulders of half the weight.

For all ordinary work the advantages of a

hammerless gun (safety, ease in loading and so on) are so obvious that I need not labour them, and for boat-work there are no hammers to catch against rowlocks, oars, or gear ; but all the same, when the roughest of rough work is to be done there is a good deal to be said for a hammer gun. Such an occasion is pit-work on the open sands, or fighting on sandhills in a gale, when your gun action, trigger-pulls and all, gets smothered with particles of blown sand. For this work you should choose a gun with an under-lever action, the strongest breech-action ever made ; with which you can crush home the breech and carry on in circumstances where a snap-action gun would strike work altogether. When you get home you can easily strip the locks and action, and remove any offending particles of grit with an oily feather.

Most of my early shooting was done with an under-lever 12-bore hammer gun of the substantial weight of $7\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. ; from which I often fired $1\frac{1}{4}$ oz. of shot backed with $3\frac{1}{4}$ drams of black powder, without suffering from excessive recoil. I suppose one of my pleasantest memories is the shooting of my first right and left at ducks, with this gun and some home-loaded cartridges.

Curiously enough the old gun was of particular service to me after I had discarded it for some years. My brother Charles had taken it with him when he first went out to Canada in 1908. In 1912 I made a trip out West to join him for the duck shooting, and as it happened lost both my

guns on the journey out. The day after my arrival at Battleford was the opening day of the duck shooting ; and Charles had only his own hammerless 12- in the house. The old under-lever gun aforesaid had been borrowed by the hired man some time previously, and when we discovered it in the hayloft behind a pile of old lumber, it seemed absolutely past service, being so rusty from neglect that neither action nor locks would work. However, *nil desperandum* ; I took the old " spout " to pieces, stripped the locks and action, and with a liberal application of coal-oil (in plain English, paraffin), I got one lock to work all right ; and presently, the second lock too. Armed with this old relic I bagged a fair number of ducks and prairie chicken, until the happy arrival of my own guns about a week afterwards. After this I christened it the " chore gun " and used to take it out as a stand-by when riding around, or where extra rough and tumble work made me shy of taking out my precious " Holland and Holland." Good old chore-gun ! I shall always remember it as an example of what awful neglect a sound English gun can stand, and yet remain serviceable.

Practically all modern wildfowl guns are built with a considerable amount of choke in both barrels. Half-choke in the right and full choke in the left barrel is a useful combination for most work. Your ordinary 12-bore for fighting at close range, and for pit work, can very well be improved cylinder in the right and half-choke in the left, which is the usual boring for game guns.

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By improved cylinder is meant a 50 per cent. shot pattern on the 30 inch circle at forty yards range ; by modified or half-choke, a pattern of 60 per cent., and by full choke one of 70 per cent. pattern, or more.

At sixty yards a full choke gun with large shot should put about 33 per cent. of the pattern on the 30 inch circle.

Now for performances in the field. A $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch case 12-bore, suitably loaded, should be good enough to kill a single goose every time up to thirty-five yards, beyond that range the odds are a little bit on the goose, while smaller birds should be killed every time up to forty yards or a little further. A long-case 12- should add nearly ten yards range to this performance, while a heavy 10-bore should be good enough for anything up to sixty yards four times out of five. Beyond sixty yards range we are in the realm of uncertainties when firing at single birds, even with the heaviest guns.

Of course geese and other fowl are on occasions killed at very much longer ranges than the above, especially with heavy shot ; but at ranges of over sixty yards, a terrible lot of shooting will be done for every goose brought into the bag. I am now speaking of flying shots and single birds. The target presented by a flock of geese when passing overhead nearly always resolves itself into a long-drawn skein, with ample spaces between bird and bird, from which a right and left shot must be selected ; so that the shot is not made easier by having a large number of birds

within range at the same time, but rather the contrary. Of course, there is always the chance of fluking a goose or two at very long range by a continuous "barrage" of big shot at each successive flock; but this is a wasteful and, to my mind, not a very sporting style of shooting. Men who go out with their 8-bore guns hoping to get a dense mass of flying geese as a target, such as is sometimes offered by flocks of teal, plover, and knot, will be woefully disappointed. With the exception of a sitting shot the only time you can get a really heavy shot at geese is just when they are rising from the land or water "all of a mob," in short, such a chance as I have described under "stalking," but which very rarely presents itself even to the luckiest of us. At times I have seen low-flying bunches which might possibly have lost four or five of their number to a double shot at some favourable crossing angle, but three geese to a right and left is the most I have ever killed by a "fighting" shot.

However, given a fair sitting or rising shot at a flock, a good stout 8-bore or long-case 10-loaded with A.A.A. shot might be expected to stop a goose or two at eighty or ninety yards range, and smaller birds up to the full hundred.

In taking a rising shot of this sort ample allowance must be made not only for the lift and pace of the birds, but also for the drop of the shot (trajectory).

There is not much sport in a sitting shot, but, of course, there are occasions when business is business.

A crossing shot at a goose that is already at full speed is of course a much harder proposition than a rising shot.

It has been scientifically calculated that with a 12-bore game gun, standard load, and No. 4 shot, when shooting at a single crossing bird that is flying at the rate of forty miles an hour, a lead or forward allowance of eight feet must be given to ensure killing at a range of forty yards. At fifty yards this forward allowance must be increased to eleven feet, and at sixty yards range to no less than fourteen feet.

Against this it may perhaps be argued that all birds do not fly at forty miles an hour, and that the mean velocity over sixty yards of big shot fired from an 8-bore is much greater than that of small shot from a game gun, on these points I cannot pretend to expert knowledge; it will suffice to say that if a single crossing bird has had time to really put the pace on, and offers a shot at any such range as eighty yards, an enormous forward allowance must be made to bring off a successful shot.

4-Bores. The single 4-bore is the largest shoulder-gun commonly made. 4-bores are really far too heavy and unwieldy to be of much service, except as shoulder punt-guns (if I may coin a name for them), that is to say for stalking bunches of fowl and shooting from a gunning punt (or equally from a sailing boat); the shot taken being either a sitting one, or just after the fowl spring from the water, etc.

Double 4-bores are rarely made.

A single 4-bore will weigh about 14 lbs. to shoot paper cases, the load for which is 9 drams of black powder and 3 to $3\frac{1}{4}$ oz. shot. In heavier guns for use with brass cases as much as 12 drams powder and 4 oz. shot may be used.

8-Bores. Here we have a much more manageable and useful gun than the 4-bore, and some 8-bores as turned out by our leading gun-makers are wonderfully powerful and handsome guns. With them fowl may be dropped now and again at ranges almost impossible to a smaller gun.

8-bores vary a good deal in weight and power. A double 8- may be anything from a paper ($3\frac{1}{4}$ in.) case gun with 33 inch barrels, weight about 11 lbs., to a brass case gun with 34 inch barrels, and weighing 14 lbs. Many gun-makers nowadays advocate shorter barrel lengths. The load for the lighter guns is 6 drams of powder and 2 ounces of shot, and for the heavier $7\frac{1}{2}$ drams powder and $2\frac{1}{2}$ ounces shot. Single guns vary from 10 to 14 lbs. in weight, with barrels 34 to 38 inches long (load according to weight).

For myself I do not care much for a single gun of any description unless for use as a "boat gun" (as I have remarked under 4-bores); in which case I should arrange to have a double 12-bore in the boat with me as a "reserve."

In 4-bores and the heavier 8-bores, black powder is still generally used; but for the lighter 8-bores a suitable nitro powder is to be preferred. 77 grains of Amberite— $5\frac{1}{2}$ drams by measure—is

a nice load to shoot from a light 8-bore, and indeed, you will find it difficult to get a heavier load into the $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch paper case, and at the same time allow for good wadding.

10-Bores. Now we come to the 10-bores, which form as it were a golden mean between the heavy guns already described and the lighter 12-bores of various descriptions.

Some 10-bores are made as light as 8 lbs., taking the short paper ($2\frac{5}{8}$ in.) cases to shoot $3\frac{1}{2}$ drams powder and $1\frac{1}{4}$ oz. shot; but such light guns have no practical advantage over a long case 12-bore of half-a-pound less weight, which will shoot exactly the same charge.

A typical 10-bore gun of medium weight (about $8\frac{3}{4}$ lbs.) bored for $2\frac{7}{8}$ paper cases will shoot 4 drams and $1\frac{1}{2}$ ounces shot. A still better weapon is the long ($3\frac{1}{4}$ in.) paper-case gun, charge $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 drams powder and $1\frac{3}{4}$ oz. shot. These long $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch 10-bore cases were for a year or two after the war almost unobtainable, but are now manufactured as before by Nobels Industries Ltd.

Brass-case guns shoot a still heavier charge; they may weigh from 10 to $11\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. These brass case 10's are 8-bores in everything but name. They are built to shoot the $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch "perfect" cases, which can be loaded with from 5 drams to $6\frac{1}{2}$ drams powder and 2 oz. or $2\frac{1}{4}$ oz. of big shot (8-bore wadding being used in the brass cases be it noted). In fact a brass-case 10- is really almost as powerful a gun as is needed for any sort of shooting

afloat or ashore, and yet compared with the 4- and 8-bores there is a substantial saving in weight, and at the same time a nitro powder can be used with all the advantages of lessened noise, smoke, and flame.

The late Mr. Frank Southgate, of Wells, a keen wildfowler (and well-known as an excellent painter of wildfowl), did most of his shooting with one of these brass-case 10-bores built by Jeffery. His best bag, if I remember right, was no less than thirteen grey geese in one day (morning and evening flight).

Some 10-bores have been made with barrels as long as 34 or 35 inches. It being argued that the long barrels shoot further: when black powder alone is used there may be something in it, but any trifling advantage gained in that respect is dearly bought in having a muzzle-heavy gun; 31 or 32 inches is a very nice barrel-length for a 10-bore.

It will be seen from the loads and details given that unless your 10-bore weighs at least 9 lbs. and shoots the $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch cases, you cannot use any heavier load than can be comfortably dealt with by a long case 12.

Amongst the gun-makers (to mention only a few) who have specialized in heavy guns, I might mention the firms of J. W. Tolley, Greener, Bland, Jeffery, and Evans, and doubtless the list could be added to. I think the most perfect heavy guns for balance and finish that I have handled have been built by Messrs. Holland & Holland; while in the case of the cheaper machine-

made guns, the hammerless 12-bores of various grades turned out by the B.S.A. Co., are sound, strong guns and wonderful value at the price.

12-Bores. 12-bore guns may be grouped in three classes:—

1. The ordinary $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch paper case gun weighing $6\frac{3}{4}$ to 7 lbs.; that is to say, a 12-bore game-gun of fair weight.

2. The long-case, $2\frac{3}{4}$ or 3 inch paper, commonly described as a "pigeon gun," but in specially built wildfowl guns the barrels will be a little stouter so as to shoot large shot effectively. Weight from $7\frac{1}{4}$ to 8 lbs.

3. The special wildfowling brass-case gun, which will weigh 8, $8\frac{1}{2}$ or even 9 lbs.

Lastly we have the "chamberless" gun (so-called) as designed by Dr. Charles Heath.

Now as to loads for the above.

The heaviest load that can well be fired from an ordinary ($2\frac{1}{2}$ in. case) 12-bore, is 45 grains of Schultze or Amberite, or 36 grains of E.C. or Diamond Smokeless (equivalent to $3\frac{1}{4}$ drams black powder) and $1\frac{1}{8}$ ounces of shot (No. 1), this is a good load for geese.

The full standard game-load is 42 grains Schultze and $1\frac{1}{8}$ ounce shot or 33 grains E.C. and $1\frac{1}{16}$ ounce.

In the long paper case or "pigeon gun" we have a substantial increase of power, the load for a $7\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. gun shooting $2\frac{3}{4}$ inch cases being 48 to 50 grains Schultze or Amberite, or 38 to 40 grains E.C. and $1\frac{1}{4}$ oz. shot.

Load for a 3 inch paper-case gun of not less than $7\frac{3}{4}$ lbs. weight, 54 grains Amberite and $1\frac{1}{2}$ oz. shot or 42 grains E.C. and $1\frac{7}{16}$ oz. shot.

Lastly, the special brass-case gun can be loaded with from 4 drams to $4\frac{1}{4}$ (maximum) powder by measure, say 56 to 60 grains of Amberite, and a full $1\frac{1}{2}$ oz. shot.

In guns weighing 9 lbs. heavier charges still can be used.

The chamberless gun (of which more presently) is designed to shoot very thin brass cases, and varies in weight, the heavier guns shooting a maximum $2\frac{1}{4}$ oz. shot.

A gun that deserves special mention is the "Altro" gun as designed and made by Messrs. J. W. Tolley.

This gun is made in various styles and weights to shoot both long and short cases; from a $7\frac{1}{2}$ lb. gun to shoot $2\frac{3}{4}$ and $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. paper cases to a brass-case gun of full weight shooting 3 in. cases.

It might be supposed that these guns, being chambered to shoot long cases, would make but a moderate performance with short cartridges, but this does not appear to be so. My own long-case 12- seems to shoot quite as well with the short cases as any game gun bored for short cases only. I need not labour the advantage of having a gun from which you can shoot short cases and an ordinary charge for plovers, waders, and ordinary rough shooting, and yet by taking with you a handful of long cartridges loaded with big shot, you can be prepared for some of the odd chances that may occur at geese in a likely neighbourhood.

Some experts have objected to the "Altro" system, maintaining that it is harmful to the barrels to shoot short cases out of a long-chambered gun; that the escaping powder gases are bound to corrode and wear away the shoulder of the chamber-cone, and so on. If the barrels have a short abrupt shoulder to the cone, this may well be so; but where the shoulder-cone is long and sloping (as in the "Altro"), so as to give the shot charge a gradual lead into the true bore of the barrel, I should consider this objection to be almost negligible, especially if the barrels are conscientiously cleaned after every day of use.

In a rough country the advantage of having a gun that will shoot 12-bore cartridges of any length must be admitted. For instance, in many townships of Western Canada, 12-bore cartridges of excellent quality (both long and short cases) can easily be got, but no others; and the same will doubtless apply in many other countries, and much nearer home.

Never on any account fire long cases from a short-case gun; the strain on the gun is very great and indeed dangerous. It is true I have seen this done time and again by fishermen-gunners without actual disaster, but all the same it is taking a risk that is not good enough. I once (accidentally of course) fired a long cartridge from my game gun, and the kick I got did not make me at all anxious to repeat the experiment.

Now as to length of barrels. Many long-case 12-bores have been built with 32 inch barrels. Of late much shorter barrels have been advocated

by some gun-makers for all branches of shooting, and some have gone as far as 25 inch barrels for game guns, asserting that they shoot just as well as longer ones.

However this may be, for myself I much prefer the feel of long barrels, that is to say 30 inches for a game gun and 32 for a long-case gun; provided that the gun is well balanced and is not muzzle heavy, a rather common failing with 32 inch barrelled guns.

It is worth remembering that in a well-balanced gun of the usual type the stock, locks, and action should be at least equal in weight to the barrels (fore-end apart); and this without any faking of the balance by inserting lead in the stock.

Long-case 12-bores are in many ways excellent weapons. Compared with any large-bore gun they feel almost as handy as a game gun, yet they possess a very large reserve of power; and if I were compelled to stick to one gun, and one only, for every sort of wildfowl shooting, I should without hesitation choose a long-case 12- of medium weight, as combining the qualities of power and handiness as far as is possible in a single gun.

With an ordinary 12-bore game gun, provided that it is of fair weight, and suitably loaded, a lot of useful work can be done, even at geese. Of course the ranging power of the short-case gun is very limited in comparison with heavier pieces. Nevertheless, owing to its handiness and general adaptability, there are times when it scores handsomely—in particular when, owing to some rare combination of weather and good

fortune, bunches of geese or ducks are fairly butting into one at ranges of twenty-five to thirty yards, and where quick loading as well as quick shooting is essential.

In pit-shooting, by day or night, such a gun is often found to be the best one can use.

As I have already related, my brother Charles once brought down five white-fronted geese in five consecutive shots from an ordinary game gun, and picked up four out of the five. On other occasions also, he scored well with the same gun, bagging eight or ten geese and two eider ducks in a day or two's shooting.

I have not given the above instances to "crab" the performances of the larger bores, but merely to show that at reasonable ranges geese can be killed all right with a small gun.

The Chamberless Gun. A gun that has recently aroused much interest is the chamberless (so-called) 12-bore.

The original was specially designed for wild-fowling by Dr. Charles J. Heath, F.R.C.S. (President of the Wildfowlers Association), and made by F. T. Baker, gun-maker, of Glasshouse Street, W.

The chamberless might rather be called the coneless or continuous-bored gun, as there is no cartridge chamber; so that although nominally a 12-bore as taking cartridges of that dimension, the barrel is practically 9-bore, having to all intents the same inside measurements as an 8-bore chambered for paper cases.

Here we have a gun of a very special type, weighing no more than any 12-bore of substantial build, firing a comparatively light powder charge of $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 drams, and yet capable of shooting effectively an 8-bore load of shot with great penetration and decreased recoil.

The chamberless differs widely from guns of standard type both in design and distribution of metal.

Thus, one of Dr. Heath's latest guns, with a total weight of only $7\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. has barrels weighing 4 lbs.; yet considering its shot-carrying capacity it is a weapon of exceptional handiness and balance.

The barrels are 27 inches long, stoutly built throughout and with immense thickness of metal at the breech. The load used with this gun is only $38\frac{1}{2}$ grains of E.C. powder behind 2 oz. of B.B. shot, which, Dr. Heath assures me, is delivered with remarkable penetration and effect at long ranges. This achievement I consider is only explicable on the ground that owing to the entire absence of chamber cone, every fraction of energy developed by the powder is conserved to the task of propelling the shot.

In no other design of breech-loader could such a heavy load of shot be used in proportion to total gun weight.

Cartridge cases for the chamberless gun should be either the Kynochs all-brass 12-bore or the similar cases of French manufacture.

Cases of any length can be used, the 3 inch cases being long enough to accommodate a 2 oz.

shot charge; while owing to the small space taken up by the wadding, $1\frac{1}{2}$ oz. can be loaded into the $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch case.

The wadding is a paper-faced felt slightly cupped, and of about half the thickness usual for chambered guns. Experts in shot-gun ballistics have urged against the chamberless system that such a comparatively small powder charge cannot give adequate velocity to the shot; on the other hand it may well be claimed that 2 oz. of B.B. shot, delivered well together, can afford to give away a point or two in velocity without detriment to practical results.

To determine the merits of the chamberless system I can only suggest a thorough trial, both at the target and in the field, against any other gun of the same weight.

Guns of smaller bore than 12 are hardly worth considering in relation to any form of serious wildfowl shooting. It is true I have heard of a goose or two being killed with a 20-, but several men I know have given the small bore a trial and failed to score.

I have, however, seen quite fine shooting with a 20-bore, both at game and wild ducks, and on one occasion a couple of fallow deer knocked over like rabbits, and with No. 5 shot. Of course it is all really a question of range—but to return to our 12-bores.

The Winchester Repeater is a gun that I have never seen used in this country (except once) but it is very much used in the U.S.A. and in Canada. Some men consider the use of a Repeater

unsporting, though, for wildfowl shooting at any rate, I cannot see the force of their reasoning. I have seen real good shooting made with the "Winchester" in Canada; there is nothing prettier than to see a good shot pull down his four or five separate ducks or geese out of one big flock with the same number of shots from his repeater. In the North-West the enormous flocks of ducks to be met with give the "Winchester" man a chance of showing what he can do; and if a bunch of geese or cranes should chance to come well within range, he is able to take full advantage of his good luck.

Still I do not care much for the "Winchester" myself. Compared with a good double-barrel it is a clumsy gun to handle; and the shifting balance, as the magazine is emptied, is also a disadvantage. For these reasons I doubt whether it will ever be a popular gun on this side of the big water.

To possess a large collection of wildfowl guns of various bores and weights is of great interest, but for practical work there is very little in it. In fact, I would rather say, "shoot with as few guns as you can manage with for different sorts of work, master those few thoroughly, buy the very best guns you can afford, and treat them 'as sich.'"

If you possess a good game gun, or better still, a pair (hammerless ejector for choice), and a long-case 12-bore, also ejector, with say a heavy brass-case 10-bore, which may be a hammer gun with under-lever action, you are sufficiently well-

armed to deal with any possible sort of shooting; lastly, if you add to these a plain under-lever 12-bore hammer gun, for the very roughest work, you may consider your gunroom complete. If it is a case of one gun only for all sorts of work, stick to a long-case 12-.

Muzzle-loading guns are now almost a matter of history (though not such very ancient history). During the latter part of the war, when cartridges for breech-loaders were almost unobtainable, I was amused to see "good sound muzzle-loading guns by Manton, Durs, Egg and Purdey," advertised for sale in the *Shooting Times*. In recent years the number of cheap machine-made breech-loaders put upon the market has practically banished the muzzle-loader to the scrap heap or the local museum as the case may be; but not so long ago some curious old guns might have been seen in the hands of the older generation of shore gunners. One I can remember was an old tower musket with brass trigger-guard and heel-plate; another, a large-bore flock gun, about 6-bore, with a barrel a good four foot long, had started life as a flint-lock, and had been converted to percussion. It had passed into the hands of its latest owner, an old blacksmith, for the sum of half-a-crown—no less—and soon after his purchasing it, the nipple had blown clean out. The old man, nothing daunted, made and fixed a new nipple, and also cut off about a foot of the barrel "to let the shot get away quicker like," as he expressed it.

The sportsmen of our grandfathers' days must

have been mighty men indeed, however much they may have favoured small-bore guns for their game shooting early in the season ; for when they deserted the stubbles for moor and marsh, they seem to have gone in for “ the largest single guns they could possibly manage,” as recommended by Colonel Hawker in his *Instructions to Young Sportsmen*.

Mr. Knox, the well-known author of *Ornithological Rambles in Sussex*, relates in his *Game Birds and Wild Fowl* how he started off on a winter's morning to walk from his cottage near Bognor to Pagham Harbour, a good two mile tramp—“ with a gun on each shoulder, like Robinson Crusoe,” to quote his own words. The lightest gun of the two was a double 10-bore, the other, a heavy single-barrel (the author calls it his “ long gun,” but does not mention its weight or size), was probably a 6-bore toy of about 12 lbs. or so. Armed with this heavy artillery, Mr. Knox succeeded in shooting that day, from a hastily dug pit in the shingle, a wild swan and a brent goose, besides a good bag of smaller birds.

Captain Lacy was another fine old sportsman of the 'twenties and 'thirties, who, like Colonel Hawker, has left his memoirs to enrich our wild-fowling literature. His favourite gun for duck fighting was a Purdey double 8-bore of tremendous weight and length of barrels.

The only muzzle-loader I ever shot with was a long single 10-bore, by Purdey, not a bad gun to have in a boat for an occasional shot ; but for work on shore, the time it took to reload lost me

so many chances, that after a few days' trial I discarded it altogether.

I will close my discourse on ancient guns with a yarn told me by my friend, Percy Barrett of Wells, himself a professional wildfowler of no mean skill, who uses both 8-bore and long-case 12- on the grey geese of his native marshes.

A certain worthy of that delightful neighbourhood possessed a mighty gun (a 4-bore if my memory serves me), with which he was anxious to do great deeds. Accordingly he brought out the gun one morning for a cruise around in Barrett's boat; himself occupying an extreme forward position in the bows. He was a small man, and at the first shot he was knocked bodily backwards off the foremost thwart. "So next time he reckoned he'd toss hisself forward a bit to meet the gun." "What happened next, Barrett?" I enquired. "Well the gun missed fire, so he tossed hisself overboard!"

Care of Guns. As is well known there is nothing which so quickly attracts the notice of wild birds as a pair of bright glittering gun barrels. For a number of years I used to make a practice of painting the barrels of all my wildfowling guns a dull greyish-green colour, having in view the double object of dulling the polished surface, and protecting the metal from damage by salt water, etc.

My first purpose was fully achieved, as I proved on many occasions. Once while I was waiting for ducks, well hidden behind a reed screen, a

kingfisher came and hovered just over the end of my gun barrels, as if about to perch himself on them. However, the protection of the barrels from rust was only partial, as I discovered later. The paint was liable to get scratched and chipped off in places ; and a small spot of rust (especially in the angle between ribs and barrel) was hard to detect and harder still to remove. I was finally disillusioned when in one of my best guns about five inches of the top rib sprang clean away from the barrels at the muzzle end. The rib had been completely eaten under by rust, which I had been unable to detect beneath its camouflage of paint. Needless to say I resolved to paint no more barrels, except as a purely temporary measure ; though in the case of a single-barrel gun I do not see that much harm could result.

A much sounder but more laborious method of protecting gun barrels is to make a cover of stout canvas which will fit closely all over them from breech to muzzle.

It can be sewn up tight for rather more than two thirds of its length, having the remainder made to lace up tightly under the fore end. This cover can be made perfectly water-proof by painting ; and at the end of a day's shooting it can be easily removed, to allow every inch of the barrels to be cleaned and oiled. For some time I used a cover of this sort with my favourite "Holland and Holland" whenever there was rough work in prospect. I never found the concealment of the rib and foresight to have any adverse effect upon my shooting.

It is an easy matter to keep a gun in first-class order if only it is immediately cleaned after every day of use. Commence by taking apart the fore-end, stock, and barrels; and if wet, drying carefully with a cloth. You should then ease springs by snapping off the locks against a piece of soft wood or specially made snap-caps.

To clean the barrels of fouling, start with a pull-through dipped in a little solvent fluid; (a good solvent can be made by mixing paraffin and turps in the proportion of two to one). Continue by polishing the barrels dry with a wool mop on the cleaning rod, and finish them off with a few patches of flannel soaked in rangoon oil. Do not use a wire scratch-brush unless it is really needed to remove an obstinate speck of rust or leading.

The fouling left by modern English nitro powders, being alkaline, is practically harmless to gun barrels.

Little harm in fact comes to guns that are in constant use; it is when put away for a long period that they are likely to suffer most from damp, etc. If gun barrels are found to be heavily leaded or have been allowed to get rusty, there is no better way of dealing thoroughly with them, than to cork up the chambers, and fill the barrels with boiling-hot soapy water. Let them stand for a minute, then run the water out; clean them perfectly dry, and oil well.

Vaseline is good stuff to use on a gun which is to be stored for any length of time. Plugging the muzzles with tow is a bad practice, as it causes

the barrels to sweat ; and I think the use of baize-covered rods to fit in the barrels is open to objection for the same reason.

Sand is the worst possible enemy to the mechanism of a gun.

When shooting on sand-hills, etc., in a stiff wind, it is impossible to protect the gun altogether from the flying showers of grit which, unless carefully removed to the last particle from the breech and trigger pulls, will work their way into the action, and even the locks, giving endless trouble.

Though personally lucky in this respect, I have more than once seen a hammerless gun with the breech action completely jammed and out of work, after an hour or so of pit work on the sands.

A soft tooth-brush is an excellent thing for working a little oil over the surface of the breech and locks, and the narrower corners can be explored with a stiff game feather. The locks themselves should seldom need attention. In all ordinary circumstances they are much better left to your gun-maker to overhaul at the end of a season.

I will finish up with a few "cautions," which may seem childish, yet I have often seen them disregarded.

(1) Should you get a solid lump of cleaning material stuck halfway down a barrel, never try to drive it through by main force, as by so doing you may bulge the choke ; but humour it back towards the breech by some means or other.

(2) When putting away your gun never forget

to ease springs, as continual compression tends to weaken them.

(3) Do not store an unprotected gun in a very warm room, such as a kitchen; for whatever damp there is in the air is sure to condense on to the metal.

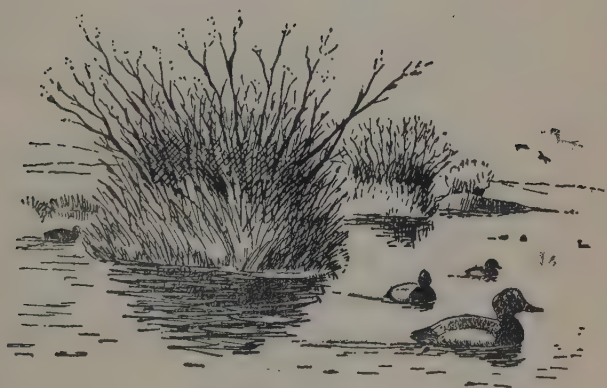
Lastly, never leave a gun standing where it could be knocked down by a dog, or in any other way.

Second-hand Guns. A good, sound, second-hand gun can sometimes be picked up at a very reasonable figure. This is particularly the case with the heavier wildfowl guns, which are not "every man's meat," and so it may happen that the owner is willing to part with a really high-class weapon at a considerable reduction on the original price. At the same time it is well to observe a due amount of caution when considering a deal, for the gun may have undergone longer and rougher usage than is at first apparent.

There is a certain class of gun-dealer for whom "gun-faker" would hardly be too strong a term. These gentry make a business of buying up, at rubbish prices, old worn-out guns; preferably those which bear the name of some well-known maker. The old relics are fine-bored inside, and blued outside, and generally "got up" to sell, with every regard to spit and polish, and none at all to preserving their shooting powers; being finally retailed to unwary buyers at prices far beyond their real value. As a matter of ordinary precaution a second-hand gun should be not only

thoroughly examined, but tried as well, before the deal is closed.

Perhaps on the whole it is best to buy through the actual maker, who for the sake of his own reputation would hardly pass along a doubtful weapon.



CHAPTER VIII

POWDER, SHOT AND CARTRIDGES

BLACK POWDER—NITROS, CHOICE OF—SHOT, LARGE V.
SMALL—CARTRIDGE LOADING—WIRE CARTRIDGES—
TABLE OF STANDARD LOADS—TABLE OF ENGLISH AND
AMERICAN SHOT

Black Powder. Except for use in guns of the very largest calibre, namely 4-bores and the heavier 8-bores, black powder has nowadays been practically superseded by the various nitro powders, to the great advantage of the wildfowler, no less than that of the game shot.

It has been maintained by many sportsmen of the old school, and is even still held as an article of faith by a few of the most conservative, that better results, i.e., more regular and harder shooting, can be got from black powder than from an equivalent charge of nitro ; but this I believe to be a fallacy, as I have proved to my own complete satisfaction by various experiments. On the contrary, I maintain that given first-class materials (in the shape of cases, caps, wads, etc.), and careful loading, any good nitro powder should equal, if not excel, the very best that black powder can do both as regards pattern and penetration.

At the same time I fully admit that as all nitro powders (in a greater or less degree) are more sensitive than is black powder to variable con-

ditions of loading, occasions may arise in the rough and tumble work of wildfowling when it will be safest to revert to our old-fashioned friend, "black," in spite of its disadvantage of smoke, flame and increased recoil.

Apart from powder and shot there are three grave faults which may occur in the composition of a cartridge which when a nitro powder is used, will always result in poor and weak shooting. These are small weak caps, too soft a turnover, and loose fitting or insufficient wadding; and whenever it is suspected that any one of the above defects can possibly be present, it is certainly advisable to rely for the time being on black powder, which is practically unaffected by any trifling irregularities of loading, and provided correct charges of powder and shot are used will give tolerable results under almost any conditions. For the same reason I should always choose "black" if compelled by circumstances to reload once-fired paper cases.

Especially when loading (and re-loading) the thin "brass perfect" cases, it is of the greatest importance to use tightly fitting wadding and to be careful to crimp the ends of the cases as firmly as possible, otherwise a "soft" nitro cartridge will result, and I have noticed that it is among the users of brass-case guns that the staunchest adherents to black powder are to be found.

Finally, anyone who is interested in loading his own wildfowl cartridges will find in black powder a valuable standard of comparative efficiency against which to try a sample of nitro

cartridges. Supposing, for instance, you have a batch of nitro cartridges which you fancy are deficient in penetration, or pattern, or both; what is simpler than to reload a few of the cases with an equivalent charge of black, and test them at the target against the nitros for pattern and penetration; if the nitro cartridges are found to shoot as strong and regular as the black powder reloads, well and good; but if the latter are noticeably the better, then you may be sure that there is a "screw loose somewhere" with the nitros.

For 12-and 10- bores No. 4 grain black powder is coarse enough, but in 8-bores and larger No. 6 grain should be used.

Nitro Powders. Of nitro powders we have no lack of choice—they may be divided into three groups:

Group 1. The 42 grain powders, i.e., 42 grains equivalent (by measure) to the 3 dram black powder charge, in which group we have our old friends, Schultze and Amberite.

Group 2. The 33 grain powders (33 grains equivalent to the 3 dram measure) of which the best known are E.C., Smokeless Diamond, and Empire.

Group 3. Various "concentrated powders," such as Ballistite, in which the powder charge does not bulk to the three drams equivalent by measure.

Of the above both the 42 grain bulk nitros Schultze and Amberite are suitable to use in all guns up to 10-bore and the lighter paper-case

8-bores, and the same may be said of E.C. Smokeless Diamond I have never tried in a heavier gun than a long-case 12-bore; it is a clean, sharp-shooting powder, giving very little recoil, but requires careful loading to get the best results. I must confess that Amberite is my favourite powder for a heavy gun; but both Schultze and E.C. will be found in every way satisfactory.

A point to be remembered when comparing the various nitros is that the 42 grain powders, Schultze and Amberite, give the best results with a full charge of shot; whereas powders of the 33 grain class are better suited for dealing with a comparatively light shot charge.

Du Pont is a powder of American manufacture, that has been well spoken of lately. I have not tried this powder in a heavy gun, but during my last trip to Canada I fired several hundred cartridges with the ordinary 12-bore load when duck shooting, and it certainly struck me as good hard-shooting stuff.

Ballistite and a few other highly concentrated powders are quite unsuitable to use in large-bore guns, and indeed dangerous.

The correct charge of Ballistite for a 12-bore game gun is 25 grains, which to get the best results should be loaded in a special cone-based case.

Personally I have no liking for Ballistite, as I have found its use conducive to that abominable complaint, gun-headache.

Shot. The rival merits of large and small shot have always been a subject for discussion and

as such are a "hardy annual" in our sporting papers.

In wildfowling even more than in game shooting there is room for considerable divergence of opinion.

In goose shooting, when we proceed from theory to practice we find that one successful fowler swears by some monstrous size such as S.S.G., while another, equally successful, declares that his best work has been done with quite small shot (for this kind of shooting) such as Nos. 3 or 4. Of course, to some extent, the benefits of one extreme are balanced by corresponding disadvantages, i.e., what we gain in penetration by the use of very large shot we lose in pattern proportionately as compared to a smaller size, and so on. At the same time it must always be remembered that large shot retains its velocity at long ranges far better than small shot, to the benefit of both pattern and penetration. Few guns of any given bore shoot big shot exactly alike, in fact some individual guns may be said to have their favourite sizes of shot, with which they will make far better average shooting than with any other.

To give an instance, I had a 10-bore gun which would actually make almost as good a pattern with "single A" shot as it would with "single B." Of course, the penetration with the larger size of shot was very superior and needless to say I stuck to "single A" when using this gun for geese.

Large shot such as AA is best used from a

pretty large-bored gun (not less than 10-bore), because the shot pellets can lie more compact in the cartridge than in a smaller bore ; moreover, in a shot-charge of $1\frac{3}{4}$ oz. (or more) you have a reasonable number of pellets to fill up the pattern.

The same size of shot in a 12-bore has the disadvantage of giving rather a thin pattern, besides making a less compact cartridge.

Lastly, when very large shot is fired from a light gun there is always (I imagine) some danger of bulging the barrels at the choke ; for which reason I should not care to use from a game gun possessing much choke a larger size than single B of 80 pellets to the ounce.

I am not prepared to lay down the law as to when the risk of bulging becomes serious ; in which respect I have always been inclined to caution, as I have seen several guns (one of which was a very heavy brass-case 10-bore) bulged by the use of S.S.G. shot. I am told that the safest way of loading this and the other larger sizes of mould shot is to find the particular size that will lie in even layers on a card wad which is pushed down to the narrowest part of the choke. This " tip " is given at second-hand for what it is worth ; I cannot claim to have tested its merits in practice.

On the whole I venture to think that the use of such heavy shot from any shoulder gun is to be deplored. The bare possibility of fluking down a goose with a single weighty pellet, at well-nigh a hundred yards range, would seem to encourage the users of mould shot to put up a regular barrage

at every flock which passes over them, however high ; crippling many more birds than are bagged, and making the rest hopelessly wild and shy.

One usually hears the " size of shot " question discussed largely in terms of reference to the particular game or wildfowl pursued, " BB for geese, No. 4 for ducks, small shot for snipe and plover," and so on ; but a consideration of equal or greater importance is the range at which most of the shooting will be done.

For instance, I have several times killed geese with BB shot (and missed them too for that matter) at ranges of fifteen to twenty yards ; when a charge of the smallest shot rightly placed must have proved effective. Again, who has not seen both geese and smaller birds brought down from apparently impossible heights by the use of heavy " goose shot " ?

Accordingly, although you might be justified in taking out No. 4 shot for geese, if only there was any reasonable certainty (there's the rub !) of shooting at thirty yards and under, on the other hand, if nothing but really long-range shooting were the order of the day, that is to say, at distances of from forty to sixty or seventy yards, then you would be best served by using the heaviest shot for small birds as well as large ; for in this case small shot would accomplish nothing.

Grey geese are always a tough proposition and to be on the safe side with them, I should select no smaller shot than No. 1. The sizes I have found most effective at them are as follows :—

In a 10-bore (or larger) gun single B to AA.

In a long-case 12-bore No. 1 to single A.

In a short-case 12-bore No. 1 or single B.

Speaking personally, I can find little use for smaller shot than No. 5 for any shooting, either afloat or ashore; though of course if going out after snipe and nothing else, I should take No. 7 or even No. 8. For duck fighting inland, where most of the shots are taken at reasonable game shooting ranges, I have found No. 4 or even No. 5 large enough; but for much of the fighting on the coast, shot many sizes larger is a necessity. No. 5 is a most useful all-round size for plover and shore bird shooting. Here, again, range must be the real deciding factor.

To bring out a supply of cartridges loaded with assorted sizes for a day's "mixed" shooting, is excellent in theory but is apt to crash heavily in practice. There is always the risk of losing a sudden and unexpected chance at a goose or duck, through being caught napping with small shot in the gun, and no time to change the cartridges for a heavier load.

Equally open to objection is the plan of loading each barrel with a different size of shot; as it so often results in the small shot being discharged at a large bird and vice versa. There is nothing more fatal to smart shooting than the necessity of thinking about what is in the gun, and which barrel is to be fired first. Since in wildfowling of all sports it is so often the unexpected that happens, and one can never tell what chances may present themselves, I would rather err on the

large size than the small in this matter of shot sizes, even if in the result an occasional snipe or plover should be able to fly through the pattern unharmed.

There is nothing at all in the old-fashioned theory that a pellet of small shot has in itself greater penetration than a larger pellet (on the analogy of a pin and a nail). It can be disproved by the simplest practical test.

Up to a few years ago there was some variation in size between shot of London manufacture and that made at Newcastle and Derby. In the larger sizes the difference was considerable. Thus No. 1 of London make used to count 80 pellets to the ounce against 104 pellets of Newcastle manufacture and so on. These variations in size have now been rectified and the shot sizes standardized to a common scale. At the end of this chapter will be found an up-to-date table of English shot sizes as published by Nobel Industries Limited, and the same of Tatham's American shot.

It will be noticed that each size of American shot is approximately one size larger than the corresponding numbering of English shot. Thus No. 5 American is the same size as English No. 4, and so on.

Cartridges and Cartridge Loading. When choosing cartridges be sure to get the very best obtainable. Cheap cartridges are often the dearest in the long run, and a single split case stuck fast in the chamber of your gun at a critical moment may spoil the chance of a lifetime.

If compelled to use cheap cases for a while because no others are available, it is safest to keep at hand not only a pocket "extractor" but also a strong rod with which to expel any specially obstinate case.

With cartridges which have very shallow heads there is always the danger of the brass head pulling off and leaving the paper tube stuck in the chamber, in which case you may need a clearing plug before you can put matters right. To avoid this danger you should choose paper cases of good quality having a reasonably deep head, but I do not recommend an all-brass covered paper case such as the Eley "Ejector." These cases may be well enough with ordinary game charges, but with heavy wildfowling loads I have known them split again and again, sticking badly in consequence. I have never known a best paper case to split in the same way, doubtless the reason is that good paper is much more elastic than brass and paper together. I am of course speaking of new cases only, a reloaded paper case can never be trusted not to split. Brass "perfect" cases should only be used in guns specially chambered for them, but paper cases may be used in brass-case guns if need be, though at a risk of weak shooting. Brass cases may be reloaded half a dozen times, but great care must be taken to resize them or they will stick and give endless trouble.

Another objectionable feature about them is the sharp edges of the cases, which are apt to cut both pockets and fingers, but this can be avoided by always using them from a belt. I prefer myself

to use a belt with any sort of cartridges, but there are belts and belts—those with metal clips I do not care for; and a belt of any sort which holds the cartridges too tightly is an abomination. A piece of tape or soft leather should be sewn along the under side of the belt to prevent the cartridges working through their partitions. A new 12-bore cartridge belt can be worked nice and easy by cramming a few 10-bore cartridges into it to stretch the partitions. One great advantage of brass cases is the margin of room they allow for loading heavy charges. To make a good tight cartridge, wadding of at least two sizes larger than the nominal bore of the gun must be used; 8-bore wadding in No. 10 brass cases and 10-bore wadding in 12-bore cases and so on, and the ends of the cases firmly crimped in with a special crimping tool.

12-bore cartridges with the standard loads are now so easy to get and generally of such good quality that it is hardly ever worth the labour of loading one's own, but when we come to the special loads for heavier guns, particularly 8- and 10-bores, it is a different matter, and the number of large-bore cartridges fired in a season will often be so small that it may be preferred to load them oneself. To load good cartridges is not difficult, given sound materials, including wadding, and remembering always to adjust the thickness of your wadding so that your charge fills the case nicely, at the same time allowing for a good firm turnover, neither too heavy nor too light.

To load a cartridge, proceed as follows. Set your powder-measure to the required charge, dip it into a bowl of powder and bring it out brimfull, settle the powder in the measure with a tap and then strike off any superfluous grains of powder with the rounded surface of your rammer. Then pour the powder into the case, giving the latter a tap to settle the powder down level. Now take a black-faced card wad, which should fit tight (I use a 9-bore card wad in a 10-bore paper case), and ram this wad firmly down on to the powder.

It is as well to check a new powder measure by weighing the charge (3 drams of black should weigh 82 grains) and the same with your shot measure, and to mark the sides of your rammer as a further check. Especially when loading the larger sizes of shot it is advisable to check your charge by weighing. Large shot lies so much less compactly in the measure than small, that failing this precaution you will be giving yourself short measure.

The next wad should be a thick felt of good quality, which can also be fairly tight-fitting, then a second thin card, the use of which is to prevent the shot pellets sticking into the soft felt. You may now check your loading thus far by inserting a rammer marked level with the tops of your cases. Now measure your shot charge and pour it in ; shake the shot down level and finish off with the over-shot wad (another card), finally turning in the case with a turnover machine, which should be firmly clamped on to a workman's bench or a good solid table.

With all the nitro powders the importance of a firm neat turnover can hardly be over-rated. A last caution (which might well have been put first) is to be sure that your cases are fitted with caps of sufficient strength. I can remember a batch of new and carefully loaded nitro cartridges which proved exceedingly weak and unsatisfactory simply because the caps were too small, and indeed, only suitable for black powder.

Eley Wire Cartridges. From the earliest times of sporting gunnery, many have been the devices and dodges of loading by which wildfowlers have tried to extend the effective range of their guns. With this end in view some have recommended pouring melted tallow into the shot, to make the charge fly closer; while others have tried more direct ways of confining the shot charge. Quite a successful contrivance in its way was the celebrated "wire cartridge," patented by Charles Eley, which, in the later days of muzzle-loading guns, achieved a great reputation.

Colonel Hawker, by no means a sudden convert to wire cartridges, writes enthusiastically of their performances (see the later editions of *Instructions to Young Sportsmen*), and sporting writers of rather more recent date, such as Chas. St. John (*Wild Sport in the Highlands*) and others of like experience, have been loud in their praises of the wire cartridge for bringing off long shots.

The Eley Patent cartridges were made in three different patterns, the "Universal," "Royal" and "Green."

The first of these contained no wire, the shot being packed in fine bone dust, the chief advantage of which lay in speed of loading (a most important consideration in muzzle-loading days), as the shot charge, complete with wadding, could be rammed down at one operation.

In the "Royal" and "Green" cartridges the shot was enclosed in a cage of fine copper wire, open at the forward end, the mesh of the "Royal" wire being comparatively wide.

The effect of the wire was to hold the shot charge compact for a considerable distance, then the outside pellets began to spread through the meshes ; the cartridge being loosened (sooner or later according to size of mesh) the wire was left behind, and the shot free to spread for the rest of its journey.

From the original wrapper enclosing each packet of cartridges we gather the information that "the Universal cartridge is intended for the first barrel at the commencement of the season and the 'Royal' for the second barrel, while the 'Green' cartridge is for wildfowl and shots at long distances." Further, that the Eley cartridges "cause all guns to shoot with double the strength obtained by the ordinary method of loading and with much greater regularity," and lastly, that "they are to be had of all respectable gun makers."

Choke-boring has long ago rendered wire cartridges obsolete, but if a supply of them could still be obtained, some very interesting tests might be made to compare the patterns, etc., given by

a full-choke barrel with those from a cylinder barrel loaded with a wire cartridge. I say cylinder advisedly, because I should doubt the wisdom of firing so solid a projectile from a barrel possessing any degree of choke. To do so might result in either a balled cartridge or a bulged barrel, but with a light gun it is conceivable that an inch or two of the muzzle would possibly accompany the cartridge in its flight !

A more questionable way of holding the shot together is to pour the charge into a turned-in section of 16-bore tubing, and then load the whole into a 12-bore case, which it will exactly fit. We have found on trial that these home-made concentrators proved very erratic ; five out of every six appeared to travel for eighty yards or so like a solid bullet.

Another "dodge" and a most pernicious one, which must be absolutely condemned, as it imposes a great and serious strain on the gun, is to nick round the side of a cartridge with a sharp knife, so that when fired, instead of the turnover being driven open and the shot released, the whole forward end of the cartridge, wads and all, is blown through the barrel in a solid lump. I have seen a crippled goose knocked over on the open sands at about ninety yards with one of these cut cartridges, and a big gull, a flying shot, brought down at almost the same distance with a home-made 16-bore concentrator.

A practice beloved of some old gunners was to fill the shot charge up solid with melted tallow, a comparatively harmless expedient which is cer-

tainly effective up to a point in holding the shot together; but the patterns obtained, though close, are apt to be patchy, giving on the whole fluky and unreliable results, and the same can be said of oiling the shot.

The following is a table of loads suitable for the various denominations of paper-case guns from 4-bore down to the standard 12-bore game gun.

The special loads suitable for brass-case guns I have already mentioned in the text of Chapter VII.

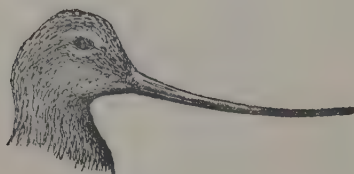
Gauge of Gun	Length of Cartridge Case, inches	Black Powder drams	Nitro 42 grain Schultze etc.	Shot ounces	Nitro 33 grain E.C. etc.	Shot ounces
4	4	9		3 $\frac{1}{4}$		
8	4 $\frac{1}{4}$	8		2 $\frac{3}{8}$		
8	4	7 $\frac{1}{2}$		2 $\frac{1}{4}$		
8	3 $\frac{3}{4}$	7		2 $\frac{3}{8}$		
8	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	6 $\frac{1}{2}$		2 $\frac{1}{4}$		
8	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	6	77	2 $\frac{1}{8}$	60	2
10	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	60	1 $\frac{3}{4}$	48	1 $\frac{5}{8}$
10	3	4	56	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	46	1 $\frac{1}{2}$
10	2 $\frac{7}{8}$	4	56	1 $\frac{1}{8}$	44	1 $\frac{7}{16}$
10	2 $\frac{5}{8}$	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	49	1 $\frac{3}{8}$	38	1 $\frac{5}{16}$
12	3	4	54	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	42	1 $\frac{5}{16}$
12	3	3 $\frac{3}{4}$	50	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	40	1 $\frac{1}{4}$
12	2 $\frac{3}{4}$	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	49	1 $\frac{1}{4}$	39	1 $\frac{1}{4}$
12	2 $\frac{3}{4}$	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	46	1 $\frac{1}{4}$	36	1 $\frac{1}{4}$
12	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	3 $\frac{1}{4}$	45	1 $\frac{3}{8}$	35	1 $\frac{3}{8}$
12	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	3	42	1 $\frac{3}{8}$	33	1 $\frac{1}{16}$
					Balli- stite Powder	
12	2 $\frac{3}{4}$				28	1 $\frac{1}{4}$
12	2 $\frac{1}{2}$				25	1 $\frac{1}{16}$

Details of English Shot Sizes
(Messrs. Nobel Industries Ltd.)

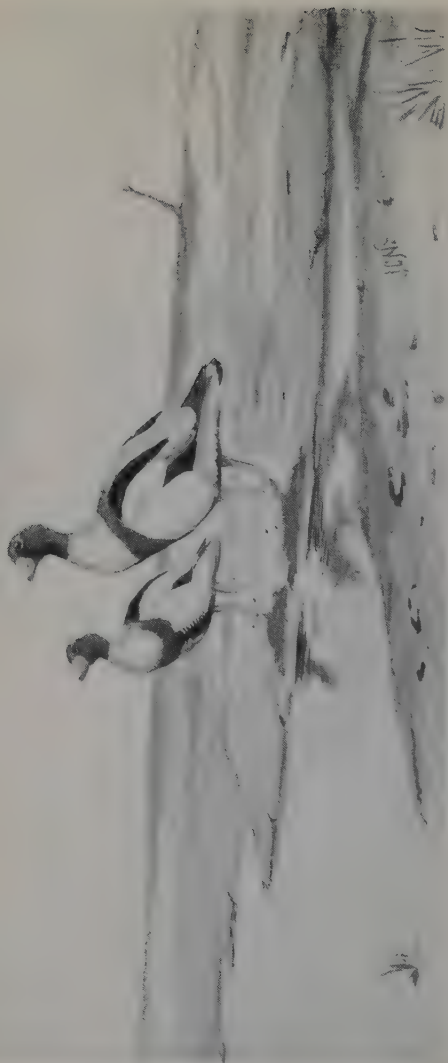
Designation	Pellets per oz.	Designation	Pellets per oz.
LG	6	1	100
MG	7	2	120
SG	8	3	140
<i>Special</i> SG	11	4	170
SSG	15	4½	200
SSSG	20	5	220
SSSSG	25	5½	240
SSSSSG	30	6	270
AAA	35	6½	300
AA	40	7	340
A	50	8	450
BBB	60	9	580
BB	70	10	850
B	80		

Tatham's American Shot Sizes.

Designation	Pellets per oz.	Designation	Pellets per oz.
4	136	7½	345
5	172	8	409
6	223	8½	495
7	299	9	585



SHELD-DUCKS



CHAPTER IX

BRITISH WILD DUCKS

SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS—SHELD DUCKS, MALLARD, WIGEON, ETC.—DIVING DUCKS—POCHARD, ETC.—SEA-DUCKS

WILD ducks can be divided broadly into two separate groups, namely, surface-feeding and diving ducks; called respectively by wildfowlers long-winged and short-winged fowl.

The first group consists of the mallard, pintail, wigeon, teal, etc., and in the second group are found the pochard, tufted duck, and scaup, besides those purely marine species, the eiders, scoters, etc. The sheld-ducks stand in a group by themselves.

All the surface-feeding ducks have regular habits of flighting, and unlike the geese they feed at night and rest during the day.

The diving ducks with few exceptions have no regular flighting habits and feed entirely by day.

The sea-ducks never venture inland, but make short flights to feed in the shallower parts of the tideway at low water.

Again, the surface-feeding ducks have comparatively long wings and round bodies, and when swimming look to float level in the water. The diving ducks can be distinguished by their short

wings and flat bodies; they swim low in the water, often with their backs and tails awash.

I shall now, without further generalization, start away on the detailed list of British wild ducks.

SHELD-DUCKS

Sheld-ducks are handsome birds with their black, white, and chestnut plumage and red beaks; but they are almost useless to anyone but a collector. I must confess I never had the courage to have one cooked.

Apart from their curious habit of nesting in holes in the sandhills, they resemble geese rather than ducks, both in their flight and carriage.

Sheld-ducks feed entirely on the shore, and their movements are accordingly governed by the state of the tide. In many parts of England they are better known in summer than during the winter months; they can be met with all round our coast in suitable localities.

I have seen bunches of from twenty or thirty birds collected together on one piece of tidal water early in May.

Sheld-ducks are seldom found on fresh water or far inland, yet I once flushed a single bird from a small pond in Wembley Park which has since been drained and built over. They are at all times the wariest of wildfowl and know how to take good care of themselves. Both drake and duck have similar markings, but an old drake can be distinguished by his size, brilliance of colours, and a well-defined knob at the base of the beak.

RUDDY SHELD-DUCK

This is a bird of more Southern range than the last. It is so commonly kept on ornamental water in a half-tame condition that it would be difficult to determine what proportion of the ruddy sheld-duck that are shot are genuine wild birds and not merely "escapes." I have seen some handsome hybrids between this bird and the Egyptian goose. The general colour scheme of the ruddy sheld-duck is rufous chestnut, with white shoulders and black flight feathers; the legs and feet are black.

MALLARD

The Mallard is certainly the most well-known and widely distributed of our British wild ducks. I suppose there is not a single county where it is not resident with us as a nesting species. Our home-nesting mallard moult in July, and the young birds are able to fly by about the first week of August. A few weeks later on, when the young birds are strong on the wing, there is a general gathering together of ducks from the smaller ponds and fresh marshes which they have frequented during the summer on to the larger lakes and broads, and they begin to get into regular habits of flighting.

By mid-October there often seems to be a scarcity of mallard compared with their numbers in August and September; which I take it is brought about by a gradual process of migration, our own home-bred ducks leaving us to pass

their winter further south in France or Spain. However, a few weeks later their places begin to be filled three and four times over by the foreign mallard which come to us from Sweden and Denmark and the Baltic shores generally. In fact, this exchange of units takes place in the case of nearly all our so-called resident wildfowl, and the stream of southward migration is kept up intermittently all through the winter months.

A good proportion of the foreign mallard which visit our shores in the winter-time can be easily distinguished from home-bred birds by their smaller size and darker colouring.

In mild winters mallard pair very early in the year and by the end of February all the flocks are composed of even pairs.

In their choice of food mallard are the most omnivorous of ducks; from corn of all sorts, beans, acorns and chestnuts down to earth-worms and water insects, nothing comes amiss to them. I have shot mallard at morning flight that were full up to the chin with acorns. When driven to feed on the shore by hard weather they will eat pretty well any sort of marine weed they can obtain, and under those circumstances get very rank flavoured. It is the invariable habit of mallard to feed during the night and rest during the day either on a sheltered roadstead or arm of the sea or else on some quiet lake or broad inland, flying to and from their feeding-grounds at dusk and dawn respectively.

GADWALL

Generally speaking the Gadwall is to be considered one of our rarest ducks. It is more frequently met with in the Broadland district of Norfolk than elsewhere. Of three specimens in my father's collection, one was shot in November, 1877, a second in September, 1881, and a third in February, 1905 ; all on Buckenham Broad.

In appearance the gadwall resembles a small mallard except that the drake's colouring consists entirely of beautifully pencilled greys and browns. The drake can be distinguished from other ducks by his grey "half-moon" markings on the breast, and chestnut coloured wing-butts ; and both sexes by the possession of a white "speculum," or wing-bar.

AMERICAN WIGEON

The American wigeon, as its name implies, is purely a nearctic species. Two or three specimens only have been obtained in this country. It is not uncommonly kept as an ornamental water fowl. It is a handsome bird, though lacking the rich chestnut colours that are present in the European wigeon. Its voice is a harsh croak, very different from the clear musical "Whee-oh," so familiar to the British shore gunner.

WIGEON

Though not so widely distributed as the mallard, wigeon are without doubt the most numerous of all the ducks (game ducks, that is) that visit our shores. The first wigeon arrive on the East Coast

in September and October, and at that time are often very tame. These are mostly young birds, and during the first few weeks of their sojourn with us they may be found feeding on the mud flats in the day-time.

Punt gunners keep a keen look-out for these early wigeon, of whose tameness I could give one or two remarkable instances. Suffice to say that once in early November I saw a bunch of about thirty wigeon fired at by a Breydon punt gunner. The birds took a short fly round and then came back and pitched again in practically the same spot! A split cartridge case delayed the re-loading of the big gun, and a second gunner, hastening to the scene of action, was able to nip in and take the next shot. The result of these two shots was only three and two ducks respectively, a miserable score under the circumstances; for had the two gunners been working in partnership instead of racing one another and "shooting jealous" at extreme ranges, I imagine that they ought to have easily mopped up the whole party. Later on in the season wigeon always feed at night (flying early before the dawn, and again at dusk), although if left undisturbed a few birds will still feed in the day-time to some extent; and certainly the wigeon which spend the day on inland lakes or broads do not waste much time in sleep, for the grass on the banks or islands will be found nibbled as close as a goose-green by them.

Corn of any sort has no attraction for wigeon. Where there are extensive mud-flats they feed

almost entirely on the *Zostera Marina* (wigeon grass), but where there is none to be found (as is the case on long stretches of the coast), they will flight inland to the fresh marshes and feed on sweet grass.

The comparative abundance of wigeon on our coasts is to a great extent determined by the weather conditions prevailing abroad.

Hard weather in the Baltic is certain to bring us plenty of wigeon and other wildfowl.

In many winters we find a sudden rush of wigeon coming in about the last week of February and even later ; while return flights of birds migrating northward to their summer quarters may pass along the East Coast as late as the first week in April.

They are among the latest of all ducks to get up their full colour, and are seldom found in full plumage much before the new year.

In their choice of a resting-place during the day wigeon show a much hardier disposition than mallard and teal, for whereas mallard when at sea prefer a calm quiet roadstead, and on inland water the snug reed-sheltered corners, wigeon on the other hand, seem to delight in the open sea, and will always be found on the widest and most exposed part of any inland water that they favour.

PINTAIL

Though hardly deserving the definition rare, the pintail is certainly very local in its distribution.

In hard winters a good number are to be met with on the East Coast but keep out to sea with

the wigeon, and few are shot except by punt gunners.

Most of the pintail that can be seen hanging in the London poulterers' shops have been sent us from the decoys of Holland and Friesland, where over a thousand fowl (most of them pintail) have been known to be taken in one single decoy during the course of a few days. I have seldom met with pintail in this country; a single duck shot on Pagham Harbour, and some few seen on the lake in Holkham Park, and elsewhere, is the limit of our acquaintance. I have, however, had excellent sport with them in Canada, and we used to reckon them one of the very best ducks either for sport or eating.

When on flight they fly high and fast in regular V-shaped flocks. A winged pintail will run like a cock pheasant.

According to the "authorities," pintail have been known to nest occasionally in Scotland and Ireland, but not in England. However that may be, in the spring of 1912, I had the pleasure of finding a pair of pintail nesting on a remote marsh in Kent; the nest, like a wild duck's, was placed in long dry grass, and the drake bird was swimming on a marsh pool a few yards away. I was told by the keeper that they had nested in the same place the previous year, and also that he had several pairs of shovellers nesting on the same ground.

Pintail, like wigeon, feed almost entirely on marine grasses, etc. They can be distinguished at a glance from other ducks by their long slender

build and the tail (especially in the drake) prolonged to a point. The speculum is purple bronze colour with a chestnut-coloured bar above it. Length of a full-grown drake about 27 inches.

In a wild state all duck hybrids are rare, but the cross between mallard and pintail is not uncommon in captivity. A very fine example of a wild mallard-pintail cross, a drake bird, was shot on the lake at Shillinglea (W. Sussex) in January, 1925, a drawing of which by Mr. W. Frohawk appeared in the *Field*.

TEAL

The Teal is our smallest wild duck, but one of the best for sport; though both for beauty of colour and as a delicacy, I hold that he is surpassed by both wigeon and pintail.

Teal are fond of shallow semi-tidal inland water and flooded water meadows, etc., where they feed on minute worms, water insects, etc. Small flocks are occasionally found on tidal mud-flats from August to early October. I am inclined to think that these early teal are our own home-bred birds and not fresh arrivals from the Continent. As with other wildfowl, hard weather abroad brings us an increase of their numbers, but should we be visited with prolonged frost they are soon banished still further South.

Teal have a very wide geographical range.

In Canada their place is taken by a closely-allied form, viz., the American green-winged teal.

They nest in several English counties, including Norfolk, Surrey and Sussex. The nest is made

some distance from the water in long grass, etc. One nest which I found near Frensham Little Pond was placed in knee-deep heather.

Teal go on flight at much the same time as mallard. There are no ducks that can jump from the water or change direction quicker, although for sheer steady point-to-point speed I would back some of our heavier fowl. On the wing they often gather together in a close bunch and by so doing offer the chance of a "heavy" shot. I once killed seven teal with a double shot from a game gun and instances could be found of much heavier shots.

GARGANEY OR SUMMER TEAL

As his second name implies, the Garganey is only known in England as a summer fowl.

It is one of our rarest ducks, nesting very sparingly in the "Broads" district of Norfolk, and leaving us to migrate South, in early autumn.

Garganey are said to pass the winter in Spain and Northern Africa. A single bird shot on September 28th, 1880, on Buckenham Broad, is in my father's collection; I think we have also seen this duck on two or three occasions without securing one.

Distinguishing points: The adult drake has a white stripe over the eye, and "half moon" pattern feathers on the breast. The general colour scheme in both sexes consists of greys and browns, with olive-green speculum and blue shoulders (like a shoveller). In size it is a trifle larger than the common teal.

SHOVELLER

Shovellers are handsome and sporting ducks. In their habits they are somewhat like teal and like them they are mud-feeders and frequent shallow ponds and broads. When feeding they have a habit of swimming along with beaks half submerged, sifting the mud and water for the minute worms and insects on which they feed. In England the shoveller seems to be more of a summer fowl than any of our ducks except the garganey, and with few exceptions they have all gone South by the end of October.

They nest rather freely in the "Broads" district of Norfolk and also in the remoter marsh country of Kent and Sussex.

The Shoveller is one of the commonest ducks in the Prairie country of North-West Canada, where it is called "spoonie" or "spoonbill."

Distinguishing points: adult drake, white breast; both sexes, grey-blue shoulder butts, orange yellow feet, and the broad spoon-shaped bill.

Though shovellers have been described by some writers as delicious eating, my own experience of them at home and abroad is that they are rather inferior table birds, and in this respect easily the worst of the surface-feeding ducks.

POCHARD

We now come to the diving ducks or short-winged fowl, distinguishable by their short wings, broad feet, and squat bodies.

First of these, and quite the best either for sport or the table is the Pochard. With his red

head, black breast and white canvas-marked back, a pochard drake is a striking bird in the bag; while in flavour he resembles his famous North American cousin, the Canvas-back duck.

According to old writers on wildfowling, enormous numbers of pochards (locally called dun birds) used to be taken in nets on the flight ponds of Essex; and they are still pretty numerous at times on suitable water, though local and by no means universally distributed.

Pochards rise low along the water, but once started they can fly at a tremendous pace and gradually mount to a great height; they love big, open ponds and meres, and never resort to the coast until driven there by the freezing over of the inland broads, etc.

Pochards are strictly vegetable feeders, and live on water-weeds and grasses which they obtain by diving. They feed either by night or day according to local conditions. Though hardly so consistent in their habits of flighting as mallard, teal, etc., in some places there is a regular evening flight of pochards. Hickling Broad and Horsey Mere are their great strongholds in Norfolk, and I have met with fair numbers on the River Alde in Suffolk.

They are well-known on some of the big ponds of Surrey and the reservoirs near London.

As a nesting species they are getting commoner and extending their range; in addition to the more favoured counties of Norfolk and Essex, I know at least one place in Sussex where they nest.

WHITE-EYED POCHARD

This is a duck of more southern range than the common pochard. Is found in Egypt and India.

It is rather smaller than the pochard, a rufous colour all over and also to be distinguished by its white eyes, whereas the eyes of the common pochard are bright blood red. In the Dyke Road Museum at Brighton, is a hybrid between this bird and the common pochard, which was shot on Hickling Broad by the late Mr. E. T. Booth.

RED-CRESTED POCHARD

This is a handsome duck rather larger than the pochard. Its general plumage is dusky, the head is yellowish chestnut with a loose crest, and beak bright red.

Like the last mentioned it is a bird of Southern range, and is said to be numerous on some of the big lagoons of Spain. Both the white-eyed and red-crested pochards must be classed as very rare, occasional visitors.

TUFTED DUCK

Tufted ducks are handsome little fellows and as far as my own observation goes they have got commoner of recent years, especially in the home counties. Good numbers of them can be found on most of the big reservoirs near London.

They are pretty well distributed in all the English counties where there is suitable water for them, from the lakes of the Border country down to the big ponds of Surrey and Sussex.

They nest rather freely on the Tring Reservoirs, and I suspect much nearer London also.

Tufted ducks much resemble the pochards in their habits, and particularly in their preference for fresh water.

The general colour scheme of the tufted drake is black and white with a white speculum on the wing and a long silky tuft on the head; the eyes are bright golden yellow.

In young birds and females the general plumage is dark sooty brown.

GOLDEN-EYE

Golden-eyes are Northern birds and so far as I know there is no well-authenticated instance of their having nested in any part of the British Islands. They come to us rather late in the autumn and stop on well into March. The Golden-eye is comparatively uncommon on the East and South coasts, except in severe winters. In the North they are more plentiful, and are fairly well distributed on the loughs and tarns of the Border, and along the Solway shore. I have seen Monkhill Lough (Cumberland) fairly smothered with them, and there are generally some to be found along the River Leven from Windermere to Morecambe Bay. It is noticeable what a small proportion of the Golden-eyes that are met with south of the Border are adult birds—presumably the younger birds migrate further South in the autumn and winter. Old Golden-eyes fly with a very quick and noisy wing-beat, and hence they have been locally called “rattle

wings." The drakes are most handsome birds with their brilliantly-shot magpie colouring.

Old Norfolk gunners used to call this bird the "pied wigeon," transferring the name "golden-eye" to the tufted duck (and the wigeon, by the way, they would call a "smee" duck). Golden-eyes are most expert divers and stay under water longest of any of the diving ducks.

In common with some other Northern ducks they have the curious habit of nesting in holes and hollow stumps of trees, etc.

They feed on small crustaceans, shell-fish, and water insects, etc. Young birds are tolerably good eating.

SCAUP DUCK

Now we come to those of the diving ducks which are more exclusively marine in their habits. There are the Scaup, the Scoters, Eiders, etc., which I shall group together under the common title of "Sea-ducks."

All these sea-ducks have the same habits.

They are found living almost entirely on the salt water, where they feed on shell-fish such as small mussels, etc. It is their habit to flight on the ebb to bays and shallow parts of the tide-way where they can dive to reach their food with the least trouble.

Sea-ducks of all sorts rise low along the water, and fly at a great pace, but never rise to any height. They are the most expert of divers, and a winged bird, whether scaup or black duck, takes a lot of stopping; if merely winged it will rise

to the surface of the water partially submerged and hardly show more than head and neck before diving again.

Scaup duck are very occasionally met with inland on fresh water ; Scoters, etc., practically never. I have seen a few scaup as far up the Thames as Vauxhall Bridge, and three (immature) ducks stayed for some weeks on the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens during the winter of 1923.

The name " Scaup " is derived from the mussel scaup which is their principal food at sea.

The voice of the scaup duck is a harsh croak.

LONG-TAILED DUCK

This Arctic species is not very uncommon on the North and East Coast. A sprinkling of long-tailed ducks, most of them young birds, can generally be found at sea with the black ducks and scaup. On the South Coast they are rare ; however, I shot a single specimen in December, 1923, on Pagham Harbour. The only duck of this species that I have actually seen away from salt water was a very fine old drake which was swimming on a small marsh pond near Holkham.

The Long-tail is the only duck in which the drake bird assumes a different spring plumage from that of winter. This is a colour-change and not a moult ; the whole colour scheme becoming richer and darker, and reminding one of the spring plumage of some of the wading birds.

Both the Harlequin and the Buffel-headed duck I need only mention by name. They are exceedingly rare ducks and have been placed on

the British list on the strength of but two or three specimens. The Buffel-head is a "miniature golden-eye," a North American duck, and is locally called "butter ball" in Canada, while the Harlequin, although so rare with us, is common in Iceland, where it is said to nest in fair numbers.

In the case of the Harlequin and other rare sea-ducks that have a wide northern range, I hazard the suggestion that possibly they may have occurred on our coasts with greater frequency than would appear to be the case from our slender records.

No one of ordinary intelligence could pass over so striking a bird as an old Harlequin drake. But even a naturalist of some experience might easily overlook a female or young bird in its inconspicuous garb of browns and greys.

Therefore, if we remember the large proportion of immature birds to adults in the numbers of all the Northern sea-ducks (golden-eyes, long-tails, eiders, etc.) which visit our coast line, it seems to me highly probable that many a rare duck has gone unnoticed and unrecorded into the bag, along with a miscellaneous collection of scaup and black duck, to make a "duck stew" for some humble fisherman gunner and his family.

The colour of an adult Harlequin drake is slate grey with chestnut flanks, boldly streaked in various places with white bands.

COMMON SCOTER OR BLACK DUCK

Though usually considered of little value either for sport or food, the humble Scoter or Black

Duck (as he is always called) is not altogether to be despised ; and certainly if quantity makes up for some lack of quality, black ducks are at times well worth a certain amount of attention from the wildfowler. I have often been amazed at their numbers.

Both scaup and black duck are common anywhere round the coast where there are suitable feeding grounds for them, but the black duck is by far the most numerous, particularly so in the Wash.

The voice of the black duck is a soft clear whistle, while that of the scaup is a harsh croak. The best way of shooting these sea-ducks is from a boat anchored on their feeding-grounds ; with a good fleet of wooden decoys on the water, to attract the birds as they flight in. Working in this way it is not unusual for a single gun to bag from a dozen to thirty ducks on a tide, and much heavier bags are on record. Another way is for a large party to go out with each gun in a separate boat so as to drive the ducks to and fro between two lines of guns.

None of the sea-ducks can be called good eating, but if skinned and then cooked in pies or puddings with the important addition of bacon and onions, they can be made tolerably palatable.

VELVET SCOTER

This is a much scarcer bird than the common black duck, and is mostly met with in pairs or little parties of from five and six to a dozen. It is nearly twice the weight of the black duck, apart from which it is easily distinguishable by a

white bar on the wings and a spot of the same colour close to the eye.

I have shot this duck on the Wash and also in North-West Canada.

SURF SCOTER

The Surf Scoter is an American duck which has very rarely been shot on our coasts.

It is a smallish duck with a brilliant pink and orange beak and a white stripe on the head and neck ; the rest of its plumage (as in all the scoters) is glossy black in the drake, and dull brown in the ducks and young birds.

EIDER DUCK

The Eider is not to be met with on the East and South coasts with the exception of a few stragglers, which are almost always young birds, and an adult drake can be considered a rare trophy.

True sea-ducks, the few eiders that at times visit the Norfolk coast keep well out on the tideway and are seldom seen close along shore. I have never heard of one being shot on land ; the nearest approach to it was in the case of two (duck and drake) which were shot by my brother Charles, one morning in November, 1906, from the harbour wall at Wells. Both these, I take it, were birds of the year ; the drake showing no more of his colour than a white spot about the size of a florin on each shoulder, and a few spangles here and there.

The southernmost place where this duck is known to nest in England is the Farne Islands

off the coast of Northumberland. On the East Coast of Scotland eiders are fairly numerous.

An adult eider will weigh from 5 to 6 lbs.

In his full colour of white, black, and buff, an old drake is a strikingly handsome bird, and a younger drake with his brown "duck's" plumage spangled over with white feathers is hardly less pleasing.

KING EIDER

The King Eider is a very rare visitor from the far North. The nearest country that it nests in is Iceland. In colour and size it resembles the common eider, the chief difference noticeable in the adult King drake is the enormously swollen and brightly coloured base of the beak, and more black on the back.

STELLER'S EIDER

This is a much smaller bird than the last two mentioned, being no larger than a widgeon.

The drake is most strikingly coloured, being pied with glossy black and rich buff-colour; while the duck's colour consists of mottled browns and greys. The speculum in both sexes is dark blue.

There are (as far as I know) only two well-recorded instances of this duck being shot on our coasts, one on the Norfolk coast and one in Yorkshire.

GOOSANDER, MERGANSER AND SMEW

These fish-eating birds are usually included in a list of British wildfowl, though they have little in common with the true ducks; from which

they can be distinguished at a glance by their "saw bills."

It is to be feared that trout and salmon fry figure largely in the menu of the first two, for which reason they meet with short shrift from keepers of streams, etc.

Goosanders are rather scarce except in the Border counties, but I have met with them two or three times on the Norfolk coast. They fly with a marvellously quick wing-beat. The Merganser and Smew are more generally distributed and immature birds can be met with on many parts of the coast, but an adult drake of either species must be considered a prize by a collector of birds; whether it is the Merganser drake with his silky double crest and variegated colouring, or the Smew drake in his "white nun" plumage. A fresh-killed goosander drake has the whole of his under parts suffused with brilliant salmon pink, which soon fades as the skin dries.

I once shot a single smew out of a party of four or five, as far inland as Buckenham Broad. There is on the British list a fourth species, viz., the Hooded Merganser. This is a very rare straggler from North America, which I need only mention by name.



CHAPTER X

WILD DUCK SHOOTING (INLAND)

FLIGHTING—BUCKENHAM BROAD—DRIVING—MAKING A
DECOY—SOME GOOD BAGS

THE usual method of shooting ducks on a good-sized broad or lake is to surround the water with a party of guns concealed behind reed screens or natural cover. After a certain lapse of time to ensure each gun being in his proper position, a signal is given and everyone is at liberty to start shooting. The ducks rise at once to be greeted with a volley of shots, mount higher and higher and lose no time in clearing out altogether. After an interval a few odd ducks come circling back, some of which are added to the bag; the dead birds are then retrieved, and the whole affair is over. Perhaps some hundreds of wildfowl have been put up and away, and the bag resulting may be a score of ducks, more or less, amongst eight or ten guns.

Now let us consider as an alternative, working the same piece of water on the morning flight, when by getting out to the shooting ground before daybreak, and waiting for the ducks to come in at dawn, as they are sure to do, two or three guns (or one gun only if well placed) should have excellent sport, and may very well bag from

a score to fifty or sixty head ; and that because instead of disturbing a crowd of ducks already resting on the water, the guns will take up their positions quietly before any fowl are in. Mallard, wigeon, teal, etc., will be arriving in pairs, half-dozens, and small flocks from before daybreak to about 8 o'clock of a winter's morning, and giving a series of shots at all ranges.

Long shots should not be indulged in, at all events when shooting a small or medium-sized piece of water ; for however high the ducks come in they will nearly always circle round before pitching, and a patient and expert shot will wait for chances at a fair range, and score steadily. If the shooting ground is rather large, so that the fowl have a wide choice of water to alight on, a few wooden decoys anchored on the water in front of the guns may be found helpful.

The rougher the morning the better for sport, as the ducks will come in low and late, and take less notice of the shooting ; moreover the light will be improving all the time, so if the ducks are late in coming in, it is no disadvantage. The effect of the wind should be carefully considered when choosing a position to wait for the morning flight. From whatever direction the ducks are coming they will always head the wind before alighting ; that is to say, with a strong wind behind them they will come in high, carry on for a good distance across the water, and then swing round and head the wind before they pitch down. Again, if the morning is calm or if they have been much shot at, the ducks are apt to come in

high and circle several times round the water before dropping ; but if there is a strong wind dead against their line of flight, they will come in low, and drive straight on to the water to pitch. In this last case (i.e., a strong wind against the flight) the best position for the gun (or guns) is on the leeward side of the water, and of course facing the approaching flight (see diagram, fig. 1). But if the ducks are coming in high on a fair wind and the gun is posted in the same position as before, they may very well be out of gunshot as they come over him, and he will get most of his shooting out over the water at ducks which have gone over or past him and turned back to head the wind as they alight. (See diagram, fig. 2). So in this case a single gun working on his own may find it preferable to take the opposite side, while if a party of two or three guns are out together, they had better distribute themselves round the water so as to take the various chances of ducks circling round, to say nothing of those birds which may have pitched on the water without being fired at, and at the next shot, jump up and give a fair chance to one or other of the party.

As quickness in handling the gun is here of the greatest importance, and a large proportion of the shooting obtained at moderate range, I have found an ordinary 12-bore game gun and No. 4 shot the best for this sort of fighting ; and on occasions when rapid shooting can confidently be expected two guns and a loader are a useful help to filling the bag. While things are going quietly your man



EFFECT OF WIND ON DUCKS FLIGHTING INTO BROAD.

A. Direction of Flight ; B. Direction of Wind. Position of Guns 1, 2, 3.

can keep an eye open for fowl approaching from an unexpected quarter, besides marking down dead birds ; but when shooting begins to get really brisk, he must devote his whole attention to the serious business of loading.

If you are using one gun only and ducks are flying in to you thick and fast, so that you have only time to put in a single cartridge between one shot and the next, it is better to carry on for a while with one barrel only than to lose precious seconds in attempting to load both barrels. As long as there are birds coming straight to your front you should never turn round to take a second barrel chance behind you (however tempting it may be to do so). You may kill your bird or you may not, but you will probably lose what should have been a sure shot in front of you, and when using two guns get out of touch with your loader. Result : flurried shooting, which means bad shooting.

Practise passing the guns to and fro until you feel you could change guns with your eyes shut, and don't try to change too quickly at first. Remember " It's steady as does it."

Except where there is risk of losing dead birds in an open tideway, never be in too much hurry to start picking up ; as by doing so you may lose good chances of shooting at the later-arriving fowl. I have known rough dull mornings when ducks have been coming in as late as 10 o'clock. When fighting on an enclosed broad I used generally to go out without a dog and leave the picking up absolutely alone till after breakfast ;

when we used to make a fresh start, and by working one dog from the land, with a keeper in the boat working a second dog from the water, between us we could make a businesslike pick-up. There is no sort of shooting in which it is more necessary to kill your birds cleanly and surely, as most of the Norfolk Broads are surrounded with a regular jungle of reeds and osiers which makes the picking up even of dead birds a matter of some difficulty, whilst a large proportion of winged ducks will often be lost in spite of the best efforts of man and dogs. A winged mallard, if chased at once, will make for the open water and dive, or creep into a reed patch ; but if left alone he will usually go ashore to hide.

Where duck shooting is regularly practised, it is usual to build permanent shooting screens or butts at suitable points round the water.

Screens made up of a thick layer of reeds, packed between rails, are usual in Norfolk ; and provide excellent shelter from the wind, as well as cover when shooting. If the shoot is in a moorland country, butts built up of sods, of the usual grouse-driving pattern, can be used instead, and it will be well if these are sunk as much as is possible, taking into consideration the need for drainage, etc. The drainage and good repair of shooting pits and butts is an important item which does not always receive the consideration it deserves.

Questions of comfort apart, it is quite impossible for anyone to make first-class practice, crouching behind a half-broken-down screen while each leg

is alternately ingulfed in a morass of mud and water. If the shooting butt is provided with a permanent seat—so much the better. On soft, marshy soil, the regulation “shooting stick” seat proves a broken reed indeed; and is apt to “let down” the sportsman in a very literal way, when it suddenly sinks right into the ground to its full extent.

If a shooting butt is required to be constructed on a quaking bog or rond which rocks at the slightest movement, it will be necessary to drive in four good posts and build a regular platform before a sufficiently firm foundation can be obtained. A great advantage of reed screens over other forms of artificial cover is that they can be easily adjusted by the shooter to the exact height required, by simply working the reeds up or down through the rails.

A screen which is a little too low is an abomination, and leads to poky shooting; and one which is too high has the obvious disadvantage of hindering one's view of approaching fowl.

A day or two can be well spent at the beginning of each season in overhauling the screens, and if the water is surrounded with trees, lopping obstructive boughs, etc., and in short making sure that everything is shipshape for the first duck-shoot.

For over twenty years my father rented the shooting over Buckenham Broad, which, as it is in many ways typical of the smaller Norfolk broads, I shall proceed to describe in some detail.

The Broad consisted of scarcely more than

twenty-five acres of water fringed with dense reed beds, and was in shape a rough oval ; but the outline was broken up by various little bays and promontories. The surrounding cover was called the " wet carr " and well deserved its name. It was a fairly open planting of alders and similar trees, having everywhere a dense undergrowth of reeds and nettles, a poisonous mixture which would dishearten all but the pluckiest of retrievers. A network of deep dykes drained the carr not too successfully ; for at times the rides were knee-deep in water and mud.

The water was surrounded along about two-thirds of its margin with lines of reed screens some four to five feet high, which harmonized nicely with the prevailing background of reeds and alders, etc.

I always took the greatest pleasure in a morning flight at Buckenham Broad.

The first ducks would be coming in well before it was light enough to see them ; but one could easily distinguish the soft muttered quack-a-quack of the mallard, the chirping of the teal, and an occasional shrill whee-oh ! from a cock wigeon ; while every now and again could be heard the sharp whistle of air through the pinions of a duck planing steeply down on to the water. As the sky lightened almost imperceptibly just before daybreak, the loom of the trees and reed-beds became noticeable, and the ducks would appear like black dots moving swiftly along. Then when the first shot was fired, and the first mallard dropped headlong into the broad with a mighty

splash, what a commotion arose from all sides ; ducks rising and crossing and multitudes of pigeons and rooks dashing out from their roosting places in the carr, to the accompaniment of weird screams from herons and water-hens, until an answering shot from the other side of the broad, and a rush of ducks from that quarter, told us that the game had begun in earnest. With the growing light the ducks would come in higher, circling round and round before coming down within shot ; but on the other hand the shooting improved with the greater visibility. From twenty to twenty-five fowl to a single gun, or about twice that number to two guns, we considered a good morning's sport. The ducks shot at Buckenham were nearly all mallard with a sprinkling of teal and occasionally an odd wigeon or shoveller.

So long as the weather remained mild and open, we were sure of fair sport at almost any time during the winter. As soon as a frost "laid" the broad, the ducks would all clear off to the coast ; although if the frost lasted for some weeks, a certain number of mallard would return and use the broad as a resting-place where they could sit and sleep all day on the ice, in shelter and security.

The serious work of picking-up we always left till after the flight was over ; and it was not the least interesting part of the day's sport.

In addition to collecting the dead birds (some of which might have drifted all over the broad), and hunting the reed-beds for cripples, there were

always a few shots to be got at odd ducks returning during the morning, or a little drive to be arranged from the neighbouring broad at Hassingham.

Almost the only occasion when a "drive" in the day-time may be found as successful as well-planned morning flighting, is when the majority of the fowl on the water are diving ducks, such as pochard, tufted duck, etc.

As already stated, these diving ducks have no regular times of flighting, and at times are reluctant to rise until compelled to do so; finally, when they are flushed, they hug the water for a good way before lifting to any height, and thus from their habits, they are much more amenable to driving than their "long winged" relatives. On a largish piece of water where there are a pretty mixed lot of wildfowl it might be possible with good management to take some toll of the mallard and wigeon at morning flight, and later on in the day to arrange a drive for pochards, coots, etc. Advantage can be taken of any small island or promontory for posting the guns; failing which it may be necessary to use boats screened with a few bunches of grass or reeds.

Another likely plan would be for each gun to be provided with a dozen or more of floating wooden decoy-ducks to be anchored on the water in front of his "hide"; the ducks could then be "stirred up" by a beater or two and results awaited. I may say I have never in this country had the opportunity of trying pochards with decoys, but from my experiences of black duck shooting (to say nothing of canvas backs in North-West Canada)

I feel confident that it would be an experiment well worth trying.

Walking up ducks in the fresh marshes will not be found very successful, except at the beginning of the season, i.e., in the month of August, and then a large proportion of the ducks flushed will be "flappers," i.e., young ducks that are only just beginning to fly. Flapper shooting is tame sport and only justifiable as a means of bagging a few ducks for the pot before they move elsewhere. Later on in the season when the ducks have got into their regular fighting habits, hardly a single duck will be found in the fresh marshes during the day-time, for the all-sufficient reason that they are either spending the day resting out on the sea, or elsewhere on inland water.

However, if there should come a good spell of sharp weather, especially with snow, a few ducks can often be found on the marshes in the day-time, especially on dykes that are not quite frozen over, and a running stream at such a time has a great attraction for them.

With a good coating of snow and the moon right, it is quite practical to walk up a few ducks at night, by following the course of streams or dykes. The gunner should provide himself with a white overall coat and cap, and where possible walk so as to flush the ducks between him and the light.

Of course, if there are a large number of fowl on the marshes at night, it may be a better plan to hide up and make a regular fighting job of it.

Evening fighting inland—even when undertaken under the most favourable conditions near or upon preserved water—yields but a meagre result compared with the morning flight; the reason of this being that however large the number of ducks present on the water, they are apt to rise and come out in big bunches and practically simultaneously, so that the shooting is over in a few minutes: a rush of wings everywhere, a few bunches of ducks just glimpsed against the darkening sky, half a dozen shots, and you may pick up your ducks and go home.

On the other hand, provided that the guns are not posted too close to the day-time sanctuary of the ducks, evening fighting can be pursued for a long time without the risk of breaking their “lead in” to the water.

Quite good evening fighting can sometimes be got early in the season at mallard coming to feed on the stubbles. A bean stubble has a great attraction for them, and so also has a field of corn which has been beaten down by heavy rain. In any case the ducks are not likely to flight till dusk; thus, at a time when there is no moon, darkness soon puts an end to your sport.

A suitable moon will of course prolong the time for shooting, but the ducks are less likely to be punctual in their arrival.

On the whole it is sound policy to take up your position with your back to the wind; for from whatever direction the ducks flight in, they are sure to head the wind before they alight, and so will be heading towards you. When it begins to

get dark, your chief consideration will be to face what little light is left in the sky.

In a good duck country much more certain and prolonged sport, at evening flight, can be obtained by the fortunate owner of a shooting, if he will take the trouble to make a special decoy pool. Wild ducks can often be led to visit quite a small pond at night, if the water is made sufficiently attractive to them.

For this the three things necessary are shelter, quiet, and food; and the fowl can be further encouraged to "lead in" to the water by the presence of a few decoy ducks, both full-winged and pinioned. A pool suitable for converting into a decoy may be in existence already, or may be specially planned and dug.

For such a decoy a large sheet of water is not necessary; a pool of two or three acres only is quite sufficient and indeed to be preferred. Part of the pool at least should be shallow, and slope gently up to two or three flat resting places. The growth of reeds and sedge should be encouraged to a reasonable extent and the banks planted round with trees and shrubs, especially on the North and East side, for the sake of affording shelter, which is much appreciated by mallard and teal.

On marshy soil osiers and willows do well and grow quickly; but if the ground surrounding the decoy pool is light and sandy, it may be better to plant a thick belt of larches or spruce. Convenient shooting screens should also be planned and erected.

As for the decoys—you may make a start by turning down two or three pairs of pinioned wild duck in early spring. These are certain to be visited by a sufficient number of drakes, and by next August, with luck, you should have some fifty young ducks on the water, which by taking short flights round about the neighbourhood of your decoy will attract other fowl to join them, and, in the course of the next month or two, establish a good "lead in" of genuine wildfowl.

The amount of food put down must be increased with judgment, according to the number of ducks observed to visit the pool.

The food (boiled wheat, etc.) should not be scattered on shore but should be tossed over a convenient screen into a shallow part of the pool. This will avoid the waste of having part of the food consumed by rats, pigeons, etc. You should feed late in the afternoon, for by so doing you will accustom your own ducks to stay about the decoy till late in the evening, and wild birds will flight in to join them. Should the feeding be done in the morning, the ducks will finish up their food early in the day, and by evening will be feeling inclined to go out elsewhere on flight.

Note that your object is now, by lavish and constant feeding, to induce ducks to visit your water at dusk, to partake of the good cheer provided for them, instead of fighting elsewhere in search of food, which would be their natural habit and course of procedure.

Now for shooting the decoy. Should you elect to go to work in the ordinary happy-go-lucky way,

i.e., surround the water with a party of guns in the day-time, no doubt you would secure a certain number of ducks, most of them your own home-reared birds ; but by so doing you run the risk of scaring away the remainder and breaking their "lead in" for some time. Whereas had you instructed your keeper to "put away" the ducks in the afternoon without too much disturbance, you could have gone out and waited confidently for them to flight back at dusk in little lots, and by so doing you could have got a nice bit of shooting and repeated the procedure at intervals through the season. On water of considerably larger extent, this method of working up a decoy would hardly be practicable ; feeding to the extent required would be expensive and possibly unnecessary, and the better plan would be to take toll of your ducks at the morning flight "in" as described in my opening chapter.

In conclusion it cannot be over-emphasized that absolute quiet, and the resulting sense of security, is the great thing necessary to induce wildfowl to stay on any water, large or small.

Food and the company of other fowl, and in a less degree shelter, are of course additional attractions ; but freedom from disturbance is without a doubt the most important condition of all. In support of this contention a striking instance can be found in the London Water Company's reservoirs near Tottenham and Walthamstow, which are resorted to by thousands of wildfowl of all sorts.

Here the water is deep and clear with little or

no aquatic vegetation, so I imagine that the fowl cannot find much to attract them there except quiet and security, and that they certainly have to the fullest extent, as for years past no shooting has been done on the reservoirs.

Yet another example might be given in the lake in Holkham Park, the property of the Earl of Leicester. This lake is about $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile long, lying North and South, and is situated about a mile from the sea.

Here are none of the dense reed-beds and shallow semi-tidal reaches that make many of the broads of East Norfolk so attractive to wildfowl, but instead we have a long, narrow, somewhat artificial-looking stretch of water bounded by park-land and plantations, with clean-cut sides and an almost complete absence of reeds, etc. A lover of wild and picturesque scenery will find little to attract him in Holkham Lake, but the wildfowler and naturalist will find it hard to equal as a sanctuary, where genuine wildfowl of all sorts can be observed and studied at close quarters.

When staying in the neighbourhood of Holkham it has been my custom to make a Sunday pilgrimage to the Lake, to feast my eyes on the thousands of ducks and widgeon that are always there through the winter months, and perchance to pick out with the glasses some distinguished stranger (pintail, gadwall or smew) from the crowds of commoner fowl. Though the lake is less than a mile long, the various species of ducks are always to be found in their own quarters, the widgeon taking the South end (opposite the Hall) where

the water is open and unsheltered, while the mallard, with few exceptions, prefer the North end, which is sheltered by trees and the slope of the land.

Now in what lies the supreme attraction of Holkham Lake for all these wildfowl?—security, that's all. So far as I know the lake is seldom or never shot over, though a few couples of duck may be shot by Lord Leicester's party when covert-shooting round the lake; consequently the ducks have never lost their confidence in it as a sanctuary.

In direct contrast to Holkham Lake can be found many a broad in East Norfolk which looks in every way more attractive to wildfowl, yet no ducks! because owing to the existence of a public waterway, or the interests of rival shooting tenants, the water is never long undisturbed.

On some estates remarkable shooting has been obtained by rearing large numbers of half-tame wild duck, and certainly a well-shown mixed "flush" of ducks and pheasants coming over a high belt of trees is first-class fun. On the other hand the sport has proved in many cases poor and disappointing. The ducks have needed an army of beaters with dogs and boats, it may be, to put them on the wing at all; and when flushed have flown so low as to be hardly worth shooting at.

No doubt in many cases where the supply of eggs has been obtained from a game farm, it is a strain of tame blood in the parentage of the ducks that is the cause of the trouble; but sluggishness

and disinclination to fly is often merely the result of overfeeding and bad management. Accordingly, should you find that your ducks are lazy and hard to flush, the first thing is to cut down their food a bit ; and if you have hitherto been trying to shoot them in the morning you should arrange your next shoot in the afternoon. I venture to prophesy that the result will be an agreeable surprise, when you find a large proportion of the birds will spring up and fly readily enough. The reason being that in the morning the ducks are full of food and naturally a little sluggish, contrariwise in the evening they are empty and instinctively inclined for a fly round, even if they have not been in the habit of going out on flight to any great distance.

It is quite possible to be losing a good number of your tame wild duck night after night to neighbouring flight shooters, even when the birds have been found too tame to afford the slightest sport in the morning.

The rearing of tame wild duck on a large scale has been exhaustively dealt with by recent authors.

If it is desired to raise as many ducks as possible the early sittings of eggs should be taken up and hatched under hens or in an incubator, meanwhile the ducks will nest again.

Young wild duck are not difficult to rear. It is not advisable to let them have access to a pond until they are several weeks old, otherwise they will play about in the water all day long, and getting chilled and cramped will suffer accordingly;

a shallow pan for drinking from is all they require. Shade is a necessity for them when the sun is hot.

If a number of ducks should be flushed in the day-time from a favourite piece of water, without any shooting, it may be well worth while to take cover and hope for a return flight before very long. To deliberately put away a big lot of fowl, without firing a shot, requires some nerve, for if the ducks have any alternative sanctuary within easy reach you may have said good-bye to them for the day. On the other hand I have known days when such a proceeding has been fully justified by results, and when owing (most probably) to the fortunate circumstance of the sea being too rough for the ducks to rest thereon with comfort, they have started a return flight within a few minutes of their departure.

Under such conditions as the above you may take liberties in manœuvring your ducks which would otherwise be considered too hazardous.

The question how often it should be possible to shoot a given piece of water without prejudice to future sport is an interesting subject for discussion, but one on which it is hardly profitable to generalize. Much will obviously depend on local conditions, and much also on the particular method of shooting employed. The final verdict can only be given after some experience.

I suppose that the ideally placed water for duck-shooting would be situated not too far from the coast and in a position to catch the flight of migrating fowl from overseas, and further, though preferably centred in a good wildfowl country

of marshes both salt and fresh, for obvious reasons it should not be too closely neighboured by water possessing equal or greater attractions to wildfowl. Given a sanctuary such as this, no doubt it could be shot over at much more frequent intervals than an estate less favourably situated.

Now as to method of shooting. If driving the water with boats to a large party of guns be the plan adopted, then I should imagine in most cases that three or four days' shooting spread over the whole season would be about the limit, which it would be doubtful policy to exceed (of course I am now talking of purely wild birds); but water worked by morning flighting alone might well bear shooting a good deal more often, possibly once a month right through the shooting season. The "Golden Rule" should be never to shoot your water "clean out" by two or three days' consecutive shooting, for by so doing you are pretty sure to break the "lead in" to your water for some time. When making a last duck-shoot at the end of the season I have sometimes been tempted to disregard this rule and take a second morning flight on the same water; the result was almost always the same. On the first morning some hundreds of fowl coming in, and perhaps a score bagged, or about twice that number to two guns. The second morning would find the number of ducks dwindled down to a few dozen seen, and only four or five shot; while had a third consecutive morning been tried I very much doubt if we should have seen a single fowl. I must admit that I have known rare occasions when

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on the second morning quite as many ducks have been found on the water as had been there for the previous day's shooting, and accordingly we have been tempted to make a second day at the duck before some sudden change of weather, etc., should shift them elsewhere; but opportunities like these are very few and far between, and doubtless are only brought about by the lucky chance of a sudden passage flight of fowl from abroad. To get the very best out of a wildfowl shoot it is practically necessary to "live over the shop" so as to take instant advantage of exceptional weather conditions or a sudden inrush of fowl.

As an example of some very first-class wildfowl-shooting on preserved water, I will close my chapter by giving a few of the best bags made on the Salthouse marshes during the last three years; the figures quoted have been most kindly supplied me by Mr. G. T. Cain of Wells.

Seasons 1923-24, 1924-25, 1925-26 :—

1923. August 1st. 72 ducks.

1923. September 1st. 41 ducks and 220 waders of various sorts.

1924. August 1st. 76 ducks.

1925. August 1st. 88 ducks.

Other outstanding bags made on different days during the same three seasons :—

155 head of wildfowl, consisting of mallard, wigeon, teal, pintail, and shoveller; shot in just over two hours by three guns.

Two separate days (two guns each day), 68 and 63 ducks.

Three separate days (one gun only, G. T. Cain, fighting), 41, 38 and 33 ducks respectively.

In one day's driving 268 coots were shot, of which Mr. Cain scored 122 to his own gun.



CHAPTER XI

WILD DUCK SHOOTING (ON THE COAST)

FLIGHTING, MORNING AND EVENING—WIGEON FLIGHTING
—SHOOTING AT SEA

A MORNING flight on the shore, as far as ducks are concerned, is often a rather unprofitable undertaking. In ordinary conditions of weather, the bulk of the mallard and wigeon will have started their morning flight long before it is light enough to see them. Therefore the shore flyer's only chances will be at a few odd bunches of ducks, the latest on flight, which failing stormy weather are almost certain to come at a height beyond the reach of any but the most powerful gun ; and an 8 or 10-bore loaded with pretty big shot will be required to deal with them successfully. During a gale, or at the commencement of a spell of hard weather, sport may be a little more brisk. The ducks will fly lower and the flight will last longer. On some days of severe frost, or just before a snowstorm, there is a movement of ducks along the shore all through the morning ; and such weather has a wonderful effect in making ducks show up on the coast during the day-time. Whether these are home-bred ducks that have been frozen out of their inland haunts, or foreign fowl just arrived that have not got the "hang" of the country, the effect will be the same. With

snow on the ground a few odd ducks will be flushed from the most unexpected places, such as small pits on the salt marshes, etc., while little parties can be seen flying restlessly to and fro, from the saltings to the fresh marshes and back again, for the greater part of the day. A heavy snowstorm coming suddenly may bring about a regular flight right in the middle of the day, a rare chance for the shore gunner, when ducks and wigeon appear out of the snowflakes like magic, and as quickly disappear again.

On days like this it is often impossible to foresee any particular movement or line of flight, and the gunner will do well to have prepared a pit or hide out on the salt marshes ; which he should be ready to occupy for the best part of the day, and particularly about the first of the ebb. If his luck is in, he will be rewarded with plenty of mixed shooting at plover and curlew, as well as being in the way of some of the ducks that are certain to be cruising about the saltings.

Two guns of my acquaintance went out one bitterly cold morning in January to spend the day on the salt marshes. It was freezing hard and snowing at intervals. At the end of the day they came home with a combined bag of some dozen to fifteen curlew, four or five mallard, a few plover and small birds, and last but not least two grey geese ; but I must add that several other guns who were out all the same day came back with very much lighter game bags.

Of course the " glad hard weather " that brings joy to the shore shooter, has the effect of robbing

the inland duck shooter of his sport in a corresponding degree.

When a sharp frost has laid the inland lakes and broads the pochards and tufted duck are the first fowl to leave for the coast, soon to be followed by the wigeon, teal and mallard. During a long spell of frost the mallard (but no other sort of duck) will sometimes return to a favourite broad, resting there on the ice, during the day-time.

Very much that I have written already about evening fighting inland will apply equally to evening fighting out on the shore ; the surroundings are different but methods practically the same. Here, instead of taking your stand perhaps within a few hundred yards of some well-stocked lake or broad, with the fair certainty of a few shots at dusk, you will be out on the sand-hills along the shore, or down in a creek on the salt marshes, or it may be right out on the muds either lying flat or sitting in a tub or pit, and waiting for the fowl to come in from sea ; and however great may be your knowledge of the coast and the varying habits of the ducks according to tide and weather, a large element of luck must of necessity enter into your prospect of sport.

Just as is the case with evening fighting inland, it is seldom that the duck commence to flight before the very last of the light is going, but if a rough wind should be blowing in combination with a high tide, so as to put the fowl on a lee shore, they may feel inclined to make a move considerably earlier than is their usual habit ;

and the gunner should be on the alert to profit by any such favourable occasion.

As evening flighting consists for the most part in making the best of a few fleeting chances, it is best not to be burdened with too heavy a gun. A long case or ordinary 12-bore will be found most suitable. Whether inland or along-shore the evening flight is always most regular at the time of dark nights.

Wigeon Flighting. By the term "wigeon flighting" I refer to waiting for the wigeon on their feeding-grounds, under the moon. It is true that a shot or two at wigeon can sometimes be got at morning and evening flight; but as a rule they flight far too early in the morning for effective shooting. Often when turning out early after geese, I have heard the flocks of wigeon passing over a good hour before dawn. At the evening flight it is the same; they will come when it is just too dark to see them, so that for practical purposes wigeon flighting is a case of moonlight or not at all. The first business is to discover a spot where the wigeon feed, which should not be difficult, as their favourite pitch will be well marked by their footmarks and droppings.

If you can find a spot on their feeding-grounds dry enough to dig a pit—well and good; but you will generally find that in the likeliest places out on the muds it is too wet to dig an ordinary pit: so that unless you can sink a large barrel from which to shoot (rather a laborious undertaking), all that you can do is to sit or lie on the top of the

muds. Here you will be exposed to the wind, and you are likely to lose a good many shots that present themselves on an awkward side, i.e., from behind your back and so on. When there are a good many wigeon about they seem to come in from all directions, so that one needs eyes all round one's head as the saying is.

In some places the local wildfowlers use a box or bucket to sit on ; trusting to light-coloured clothing to escape the notice of the ducks. In others the most usual equipment is an armful of straw (or marram grass plucked from the nearest sand-hills) with which to make a comparatively dry lying-place on the muds. Four or five ducks for a night's work would be considered a good bag in most places that I know though sometimes one meets with better luck ; certainly the wigeon-flighter deserves all he gets.

Wigeon fighting is of all wild-fowling the most uncertain ; on some nights they will be all over the place, on other nights for no apparent reason there is not a feather to be seen or heard. About the best time in the month is when the moon is about a week old, or again when the moon rises an hour or so after sunset. " Half a moon " with plenty of cloud drifting across it to make a milky sky, and the tide about a quarter ebb is the night for wigeon fighting ; but naturally such a combination of light and tide is not always available. A bright full moon and starry sky is no good at all, as it is not possible to see well enough for shooting.

A compass is a useful thing to take with you when out on the mud-flats at night, so also is an electric torch for finding dead birds, etc. A dead wigeon lying breast upwards shows up pretty well, but one that has fallen breast downwards, and particularly a hen bird, is very hard to find in a bad light.

Wigeon that rest on inland water in the daytime, and go "out" to feed on the weed-covered mud-flats, will always flight at nightfall or soon after; and if at that time their feeding-grounds are uncovered by the tide, they proceed thither right away. If on the other hand the muds are still covered by the tide they flight out to sea just the same, but possibly in quite a different direction; later on making a second flight to feed when the tide has ebbed sufficiently.

In parts where wigeon feed inland at night on the fresh marshes and flooded water meadows, etc., their evening flight will, of course, be in from sea, and the reverse in the morning.

If much shot at on their feeding-grounds they become very shy and artful; pitching on the sea or sands wide of the mud-flats, and then swimming or flying in to feed, with the greatest caution.

The same sort of shooting under the moon can be got at mallard when a severe frost has driven them out to feed on the muds. If there should be a little stream of fresh water running out across the marshes, be sure and look carefully for signs of mallard visiting it at night (as they are certain to do during a spell of hard weather), and make your arrangements accordingly.

There is one more way of shooting ducks on the coast (which I have already mentioned in my notes on the black duck and scaup), namely, shooting from a boat in the day-time; the birds obtained being sea-ducks of various species. Rarely indeed does one get a shot at any of the long-winged ducks when at sea, whether the method of working be sailing, shooting over decoys, or driving with a number of boats.

True, I have known a small party of wigeon to fly into an anchored boat on a foggy morning, but the larger gatherings of fowl, both mallard and wigeon, seldom make mistakes; nor will they permit the approach of the most innocent-looking sailing-boat within a quarter of a mile before they are up and off.

A day's black duck shooting makes a pleasant change from the more strenuous forms of wild-fowling.

After, shall I say, a week, spent in the vain pursuit of wild geese, it is rather refreshing to be told to bring a hundred cartridges for a single day on the Wash, "or perhaps you'd better be on the safe side and bring two hundred!" Let me sketch out a typical day—a bright, frosty morning in December or January, a calm sea, and low tide about mid-day. We start away about 9.30 in the morning after a substantial breakfast (a different job this from turning out at 5 *ac emma* in half a gale, to be at goodness knows where in time for the morning flight). We stow our belongings in a handy little boat—guns, cartridges, lunch, some good bundles of straw to keep us

warm and snug (for we mean to make a day of it), and last but not least from a dozen to twenty wooden decoys. About twenty minutes' sail brings us to the feeding grounds, which are submerged banks of mussel scaup, whither the ducks will flight in from the open sea as the tide slackens so that they can dive for their food in shallow water. Arrived at a likely pitch, our boatman lowers the sail, unsteps the mast, and casts out the anchor and anchor-buoy to which our decoys are attached with a long line. The decoys are carefully paid out to ride about 60 ft. from the boat, which is fastened to the same buoy as the decoys, with a simple hitch ; so that we can instantly unmoor to pick up dead birds, and still leave our decoys at anchor. For the actual shooting I consider the best method is for the gun to sit down in the bottom of the boat, facing the bows, his back resting against the thwart ; in which position, of course, he will face the decoys. If desired two guns can shoot from one boat, the second gunner facing astern and taking shots circling round the boat. But it is a better plan for different members of a party each to take out his own boat and boatman ; so as to keep the ducks on the move between them.

Here comes a good bunch of black duck. They swerve in to the decoys and give an easy right and left to open the day. Now bunch after bunch comes along. Some curl away out of shot, some come in well to the decoys. One big lot sweeps clean on over us, and so close that a duck is dropped almost into the boat. If you should

wing a black duck he will be under water in a flash ; so be ready to give him a shot the instant he bobs up again, or you may well see the last of him.

Now we have seven or eight ducks floating dead at various distances around the boat, so we unmoor from our anchor buoy to retrieve them. One turns out to be a lively cripple and costs us no less than six cartridges before a dose of No. 5 turns him paddles upwards. So the game goes on. It is a poor day when one cannot bag a dozen ducks or so, and on specially good days as many as thirty or forty is not out of the way, while the record bag for one gun I believe to be ninety duck or thereabouts. Stormy weather scatters the ducks, and on rough days the motion of the boat makes accurate shooting very difficult. Again, there are some days when the ducks will decoy perfectly, and others when they will not look at the decoys ; consequently there is nothing for it but to organize a series of drives between several boats, and long shots are the order of the day.

Besides the black duck (the common scoter of naturalists) scaup will occasionally work fairly well to the decoys ; and perhaps one of the rarer velvet scoters or a long-tailed duck will be included in the bag ; while swans, gannets, eider ducks and other interesting birds may be met with on occasions.

A heavy gun may be used if desired, but a stout 12-bore is good enough, and if an ejector, so much the better, as it is often sharp work.

I prefer myself to use No. 4 shot, and it is useful to have a few No. 6's handy to stop a lively cripple, which once in the water will present little more than head and neck target. In this and other forms of duck shooting, it is the truest economy never to grudge expending an extra cartridge in making sure of any doubtful kill.

A second or two of hesitation in this may mean several more rounds wasted; or the possible escape of a wounded bird.

With a boat to pack all the weight, an ample supply of ammunition can be taken.

Black ducks never fly at any height; they come low and fast, and I have heard them compared to driven grouse. Of course, success in this kind of sport depends a good deal on luck and weather, as well as in being able to shoot straight and load quickly. It is not a game I can recommend for those who suffer from "mal de mer."



CHAPTER XII

SHOOTING IN CANADA

DUCKS—PAMBRUN'S LAKE—GEESE—SHOOTING FROM
HORSEBACK—PRAIRIE CHICKEN—LIST OF CANADIAN
WILDFOWL

FASCINATING is the sport of wildfowl shooting, whatever the surroundings may be: but it is doubly so in the Prairie Country of North-West Canada.

In England the pursuit of wildfowl is generally associated with frost and snow, wind and rain, and bodily discomforts according; it is not so in the North-West. There the short shooting season only lasts from the beginning of September to mid-October, after which comes the winter freeze-up, when all the wildfowl depart south in search of more temperate regions. September is a glorious month on the prairie, with clear hot days and cold nights, while every morning brings fresh tints to the autumn foliage and fresh flocks of fowl from the far north.

In seasons of severe drought the shallow prairie sleughs dry out completely, leaving behind them a deposit of alkali salts and bleaching buffalo bones, and even lakes that in an average autumn present a surface of some thousands of acres become woefully diminished in size, and so strong and bitter with the alkali that the ducks forsake

them altogether ; and the usual stock of wildfowl will therefore be absent for as long as the drought continues. However, the duck shooter need not despair if he is living within easy distance of any deep lakes of sweet water, or reaches of any considerable rivers (such as the Saskatchewan and Battle Rivers) : for it is to such water that all the wildfowl left in the district will congregate, and when their favourite haunt has been discovered, good sport should be assured of for a while.

In these circumstances the drought will not have turned out an unmixed evil.

Almost worse than a drought is a season when there is a super-abundant rainfall ; for now all the hollows in the prairie are turned into sleughs and lakes innumerable, so that ducks can be found everywhere, but so scattered about the country that though their aggregate numbers run to thousands upon thousands it is very difficult to plan a businesslike campaign against them ; and the most practical way of collecting a bag is to ride around the country from pool to pool picking up a few ducks here and there as opportunities present themselves. When approaching a small prairie sleugh which is seen to be crowded with ducks, a usual method of procedure is to stalk down and open fire on the nearest birds, with the result that the whole body of fowl loses no time in making a hasty departure. I have found it pay far better to ride quietly down to the water without attempting to shoot, and so put the ducks away without unduly disturbing them ;

then take cover and in a few minutes they will start coming back in little lots and give perhaps half a dozen satisfactory shots.

Free wildfowl shooting in England is apt to suffer from the attention of too many guns, but in North-West Canada the very reverse is often the case ; and sport may be slack not for any want of fowl, but simply because there are not enough people about to put them on the move. In the Battleford district we often had an extra good day's shooting when a public holiday such as " Labour Day " enabled more guns than usual to be out after the ducks. Around Pambrun's lake and other water in the neighbourhood there was plenty of room for all comers ; and when good numbers of guns were out, the ducks would be kept nicely on the move from day-break to pretty well midday.

I should not like to hazard a statement as to the number of ducks bagged in one morning (amongst a dozen guns) around Pambrun's lake alone ; but with moderate shooting the total must at times have been considerable, running well into the hundreds.

Pambrun's lake was in many ways an ideal spot for duck shooting, for though of considerable extent the water was not so large as to be unworkable. In length about seven miles, it really consisted of a series of lakes connected by narrows or straits of some three or four gun-shots in width. These narrows made excellent stands either for driving or flighting and the water, though deep in the wider reaches, was sufficiently

shallow in the narrows and along the shore to admit of wading ; a considerable help when picking up dead birds.

Around the lake the land sloped gently down in a series of low bluffs clothed with a dense growth of dwarf willow and poplar.

In mid-autumn the colours were a delight to see, the golden yellow of the poplar leaves and blood-red patches of choke-cherry contrasting well with the grey of the willows ; while here and there the dead bleached top of some old pine (a relic of the last prairie fire) towered above the younger growth. As a background to the whole stretched the wide blue surface of the lake, showing clearer every minute as the morning mists rolled away, whilst the ever-passing flocks of wildfowl completed a picture charming to the eye of a sportsman.

On this one piece of water, during the short shooting season of about seven weeks, we have bagged in varying numbers pretty well every duck on the North American list. Indeed the great variety of ducks obtainable in one place is a particular charm of this Canadian shooting. In a modest morning's bag of thirty or forty head we often found we had seven or eight different species of ducks ; on one day pintail and shoveller would compose most of the bag, another day mallard and canvas-back, or perhaps a miscellaneous collection of fall-ducks and all sorts.

With the earliest touch of dawn the morning flight would commence. The first to move were the mallard and pintail, followed by shovellers

and teal, and a little later on these would be succeeded by flights of canvas-back, golden-eyes and fall-ducks. The mallard, pintail, etc., were always regular on flight, but it was by no means so with the diving ducks. On some mornings the wider parts of the lake would be dotted over with fleets of canvas-backs and no amount of shooting would stir them up, yet on other mornings there would be a constant passage flight of flocks all along the lake.

When the canvas-backs were in a sluggish humour the only thing was to arrange a drive, which was generally successful ; but on the wider stretches of water nothing much could be done without a boat. Firing a few shots to put them on the move had little effect on some of the big gatherings.

On one or two occasions when things were very quiet, I successfully stirred up the ducks by galloping a white pony along the edge of the lake, and then when plenty were on the wing, I of course took cover and recommenced shooting. I fancy somehow that curiosity rather than fear was the rousing motive with them.

Wooden decoys answer well with canvas-backs and red-heads ; and the greater the number of your decoys the greater the attraction. I need hardly say that the decoys should be painted as artistically as possible, though if only the ducks happen to be in the right mood, they will come in well to the very crudest of decoys ; and a few roughly-shaped billets of wood with lumps of cork nailed on (for heads) have often been found

sufficient to lure a bunch of canvas-backs within shot.

When shooting at Pambrun's lake we seldom troubled about decoys, as without using a boat it was difficult to bring out a sufficient number of them ; moreover, the flighting was at most times so good as to make more elaborate methods superfluous. All that was necessary was to make sure of getting to the right spot in good time ; the rest being a matter of marksmanship.

The flight of canvas-backs compared with that of the long-winged ducks (mallard, pintail, etc.) is very straight and steady, but when well started they travel at terrific speed. It is not unusual to take a duck well in front, as you think, and at the shot to find your dead bird come whizzing past your head like a cannon-ball, to ricochet along the water twenty paces behind you.

Better sport can hardly be imagined than on those red-letter days when the canvas-backs were in great force and flighting freely down the narrows ; and, as we seldom took out more than a hundred cartridges per gun, there were mornings when we grudged firing a single round at shovellers or teal lest later on we might find ourselves short of ammunition to use on worthier fowl.

Early in October the geese began to arrive ; and for some days while the migration was in full swing, flocks of geese, swans, and cranes would be passing over all day long, but at a great height.

Of the geese by far the greatest number were the big black-necked Canada geese, the rest

being either grey geese or "wavies" (snow geese). In the Battleford district we never obtained a shot at snow geese, as all the flocks seemed to travel further to the westward, and grey geese were not at any time plentiful; but for about a fortnight the Canada geese were everywhere, though hardly so settled in their habits that one could arrange for a regular campaign at them. One could only keep a gun loaded with big shot constantly in hand for chance encounters.

Now and again we lost splendid chances at geese, etc., through sheer bad luck.

One morning, for instance, we were engaged in threshing wheat from the stook, close to the Battleford homestead. Some half-dozen neighbours had rolled up with their teams, to help in the work; and altogether it was one of our busiest days.

From motives of caution I had on that particular day omitted to take a loaded gun with me on the waggon; and as it chanced I had driven across to the wood stack to bring up a load of cord wood for the steam engine. Standing up on the wood pile, I was busily throwing logs into the waggon when I happened to look round; to see a great phalanx of geese flying not more than twenty feet high, and driving straight at me.

I nipped down off the wood pile, doing the hundred and fifty yards to the house in record time and snatched up a gun. On came the geese, some sixty great big "black-necks," calmly disregarding horses and waggon and the whole threshing outfit; but before I had time to get the

cartridges in they had disappeared behind the stables, having beaten me by a matter of seconds only.

On another occasion, when I was driving out for a load of sleugh hay, half a dozen swans flew across the trail not more than thirty feet high, but just a little too far ahead of the horses for a fair shot. As this time I had my gun loaded and a fairly steady team in front of me, a few yards closer should have enabled me to bag at least one swan.

To return to the geese. It was their usual habit to spend the night on some fairly large lake, and then flight on to the wheat stubbles at day-break. They mostly travelled at a fair height, and on the whole we found them very little easier to bag than the grey geese at home.

During the past four or five years, Canada geese have been visiting the Battleford neighbourhood in much greater numbers than formerly, and some heavy bags have been made by local sportsmen.

Cranes were not uncommon near Battleford and usually to be met with in large flocks ; but so wary were they at all times, fighting at an immense height, and alighting in none but the largest fields, that I personally never got a shot at any. Rarely did they make mistakes ; but one morning a small party flew over within shot of one Webb (a neighbour of ours and a great wildfowl shot), and lost four of their number to his " Winchester."

It is a handy thing when on the trail to be able to take a shot from horseback.

Your horse must be taught to stand like a rock the instant the reins are dropped on his neck, and wait for the shot without flinching. Given a docile good-tempered animal, you will have little trouble in training him ; you should proceed as follows :

First tie your horse's head round to his tail with a soft rope, in such a way that without being put to serious discomfort he is still unable to plunge away, and can only potter round in a small circle. Now take your gun or pistol and fire two or three shots at a little distance away from him. If the horse shows signs of nervousness, soothe him and make much of him, giving him bits of carrot or other dainties. Carry on patiently, firing shots at intervals, and gradually decreasing your distance until you can stand close behind his head and fire without alarming him. To be on the safe side it is advisable to pick out a soft piece of ground for the lesson, and let your horse be unshod that he may not damage himself from an accidental fall or an over-tread on the coronet.

Let all your actions be slow and deliberate ; you cannot be too patient with a nervous animal, but if you are quite sure that your horse is only playing the fool, correct him sharply.

I once trained a hunter mare to stand fire perfectly in half an hour, and finished off the lesson by firing a double 10-bore from her back ; but I will admit that she was an unusually docile pupil.

When riding up to any sort of birds in the open, you should never make a direct approach ;

but circle round them from right to left, gradually closing on them so as to take the shot on your near side.

In the case of geese, you must judge how long they will permit you to circle them at a walk. Generally speaking, as long as the birds are feeding or resting quietly you may proceed at a slow pace ; but once their heads are up and they draw together, you must act quickly ; and your best course may well be to gallop straight at them and rush them.

Prairie chicken, though they cannot be described as wildfowl, deserve a few words ; they are fine sporting birds, excellent eating, and add variety to the bag.

A favourite way of shooting them was to drive around in a buggy with a brace of pointers, locate your covey, and then get to work with the dogs and walk them up. It was delightfully old-fashioned sport, but gave really very " potty " shooting, and a moderate performer with the gun could often mop up a whole covey in detail. We found it infinitely better fun to get up at day-break, when by intercepting the chicken on flight from the cornstooks to the nearest willow scrub we often got a series of the most satisfying rocketing shots.

Big hawks of all sorts were numerous, especially the marsh harriers, which used to hunt around the lakes with the special object of picking up wounded wildfowl. They are not very valiant birds, and I doubt if a marsh harrier would tackle an unwounded duck. When fighting at Pambrun's

lake I have several times been aroused by the swish of wings, as a big harrier has swooped down within five or six feet of my head, with his bright yellow eyes greedily scanning my pile of dead ducks.

Canadian wildfowl seem to take very little notice of these and other big hawks, which I imagine is a case of familiarity breeding contempt; for in the Old Country the appearance of a single hawk or peregrine is enough to put all the fowl on one piece of water into a state of nervous unrest.

In conclusion I will give a list of the wildfowl observed and shot in the Battleford country, with a few notes on their comparative rarity, etc. I do not claim that the list is an exhaustive one, but I think it will be found to contain most of the ducks, etc., in the North American list.

TRUMPETER SWAN. Much resembles our English whooper swan. Many large flocks pass over on migration, few are shot.

CANADA GOOSE. Numerous. The birds we shot were somewhat smaller than the half-tame Canadian geese to be found in Norfolk and elsewhere in England: 8 lbs. was (we considered) a fair weight.

GREY GOOSE. (The American white-fronted goose.) Not very numerous except on migration, two or three odd birds shot.

SNOW GEESE. Numbers to be seen, but on migration only.

MALLARD. Very plentiful at all times.

The Canadian mallard is a much finer, heavier duck than the English mallard, but otherwise

identical. I have shot birds which weighed nearly 5 lbs.

Both Pintail and Shoveller are in most seasons exceedingly plentiful, and so in a less degree are Wigeon (American), Gadwall, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal.

Of the diving ducks, the Canvas-back is very numerous in some seasons, in others comparatively scarce.

Then there is the Pochard (local name red-head) to be distinguished from our English pochard by his yellow eyes, the Golden-eye, rather larger than the English bird, and the American Scaup (about the size of our tufted duck).

Scaup, which arrive in enormous quantities from the far north in October, are lumped together with golden-eyes, and similar species under the name of "fall ducks" (i.e., autumn fowl).

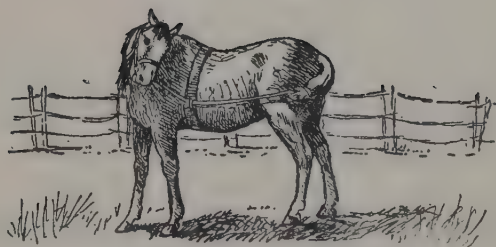
We also met with two or three other sorts of diving ducks, which were seldom considered worth a cartridge. Of these I can only identify with certainty the Buffel-headed duck and Velvet scoter.

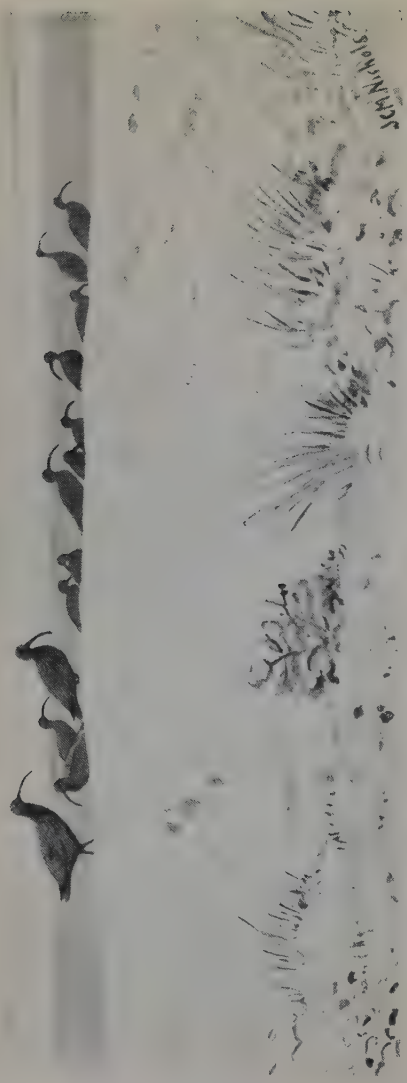
Sandhill cranes, for a few weeks in September, might be termed numerous; as already stated, we found them unapproachably wild.

The smaller wading birds we seldom troubled to shoot. Of these by far the commonest locally were the yellowshanks, which could be found in good-sized flocks.

Snipe, which I fancy were the Wilson's snipe, were numerous at times, particularly after a sharp touch of frost.

We also shot an occasional gold plover closely resembling the English bird, and specimens of the grey phalarope, and the handsome killdeer plover with his checkered "ring-dotterel" colouring, and chestnut tail coverts.





WHIMBREL ON PEVENSEY BEACH

CHAPTER XIII

THE LARGER WADING BIRDS

CURLEW—GODWITS—AVOCET—OYSTER-CATCHER—
PLOVERS, ETC.

THE wildfowl proper having been duly dealt with, it remains for me to describe the various wading birds which are sometimes lumped together by the shore-gunner under the designation of "hen-footed fowl."

CURLEW

Of our edible wading birds the curlew ranks easily first, both in size and in regard to the amount of sport that can be got in his pursuit; though as a delicacy I fear that in these degenerate days he has fallen from his ancient pride of place, when he was ranked with pheasant, peacock, heron and swan, as one of the choicest of table birds.

In an old book of Natural History, published in 1730, I find the edible qualities of the curlew summed up as follows: "This bird for the goodness and delicate taste of its flesh may justly challenge the principall place among water fowl; of this our fowlers are not ignorant and therefore sell them dear. They have a proverb among them in Suffolk:

'A Curlew be she white, be she black,
She carries twelve pence on her back.' "

Curlew shot in September and October are quite fairly good eating ; but those obtained in winter are often thin and rank-flavoured. It is a good plan to skin them before cooking. When flying with a stiff wind behind them curlew can give shooting difficult enough to satisfy the most exacting of shots ; and the sharp sideways swerve they are capable of, when they perceive the waiting gunner, has saved the life of many a bird.

Curlew are to be found nesting in most of the moorland country of the North and West, and a pair or two have been known to nest in Surrey.

The foreign curlew from overseas begin to arrive on our South and East Coast early in August—some weeks, that is, before our own home-bred curlew have left their moorland breeding haunts for the shore.

WHIMBREL

The Whimbrel can best be described as a miniature curlew, which it closely resembles in colour, shape, and habits. Accordingly it has been called the curlew jack, and half curlew ; but unlike the curlew, it remains with us for a few days only at the time of the spring and autumn migration.

On the spring migration, whimbrel are so well known that in many parts they are called May birds, and in Sussex “titterel,” from their high-pitched laughing cry.

I have heard flocks of whimbrel flying high over London at night, and have seen odd birds as far inland as Frensham and Walmer ponds.

Practically all that could be written about

curlew shooting would apply equally well to whimbrel, except that the latter are a great deal tamer and easier of approach. They may be found feeding close to a bank or other convenient cover for a stalk, while single birds may be flushed within easy shot from a drain or patch of sedge.

Whimbrel sometimes congregate in huge flocks ; I have often seen small islands brown with their massed battalions, as the rising tide has crowded them together.

A few pairs of whimbrel are found nesting in the Northern Highlands, but nowhere at all south of the Border.

The Esquimaux Curlew I need hardly do more than mention by name. It is an exceedingly rare straggler from North America, which has been recorded in this country about half a dozen times.

In size it is a trifle smaller than the whimbrel.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT

Although occurring on our shores only as an occasional straggler on spring or autumn migration, the Black-tailed Godwit is said to have been fairly common as a nesting species in the marsh country of Norfolk up to about a hundred years ago.

I found them nesting in considerable numbers on the polders (reclaimed marshes) between Amsterdam and Utrecht.

The old-time Sussex gunners used to call this bird the broad-tailed strant ; and certainly their broad tails are quite a noticeable feature, as with noisy complaints they come swooping round an

intruder into their nesting haunts, just like the green plover at home. Black-tailed godwits can be distinguished from the common bar-tailed godwits at some little distance by their taller build and straighter beaks (those of the bar-tail having a distinct upward curve). During the last three or four years black-tailed godwits have visited us in slightly increasing numbers, and perhaps it may not be too much to hope that a pair or two will again establish themselves in their old nesting quarters.

These godwits, in common with some other wading birds, can sometimes be seen perched on rails, posts, etc. ; this curious habit they seem to indulge in during the nesting season, but at no other time.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT

Bar-tailed Godwits are only known to nest in the Arctic regions, and are best known on our coasts as spring and autumn migrants, although a certain number of them remain with us during the winter months. Godwits may be expected to arrive on the spring migration regularly about the middle of May.

There are few handsomer birds than godwits in their full summer plumage of bright chestnut—"red as cherries," as I have heard them well described by an old Sussex gunner ; but amongst the flocks that reach us in May there are generally a few birds that have only partly assumed their summer dress, some of them looking as grey as they are in the winter-time.

It is to be observed that the spring godwits seem to be all old birds, whereas those that visit us on autumn migration (in September) are all young birds of the year, and the same rule holds good with whimbrel, and many other wading birds.

Godwits on their first arrival (both spring and autumn) are often absurdly tame ; however, they soon reach the other extreme of exceeding wariness and as they love wide open stretches of sandy foreshore, they are then practically unapproachable. Though not providing very much sport, they are capital eating.

AVOCET

Whether seen at rest or in flight there is no handsomer wading-bird than the Avocet, with his quaint up-curved beak, long blue legs, and boldly variegated plumage of white and black.

Less than a century ago avocets were not at all uncommon in the marsh country of our eastern and south-eastern counties, being known by the name of "cobbler's awl" from their upturned beaks.

Avocets have been recorded as nesting at Salthouse in Norfolk, Fosdyke Wash in Lincolnshire, and Rye in Sussex.

Nowadays, we can only describe them as distinctly rare stragglers from the Continent, occurring chiefly on the East Coast, and at the time of the spring migration, but occasionally in the autumn. It is difficult to account for the comparative rarity on our coasts of birds like avocets,

ruffs, and many others which are common enough no farther off than Holland.

True it is that our fenlands have been greatly altered and curtailed by drainage and so on, but there still remain all along our eastern seaboard many thousands of acres of marsh and mud-flats which would appear to be entirely suitable to their habits.

With one single exception, my only acquaintance with the avocet has been in Holland.

When feeding, the avocet steps briskly along, sifting the sand and mud, with sideways sweeps of its bill, for the minute crustacea, etc., on which it feeds.

In flight its long legs are very noticeable, being stretched out straight behind it. I have seen an avocet pitch on the water and swim like a duck.

BLACK-WINGED STILT

The Black-winged Stilt is one of our rarest waders. It is a bird of southern range and not likely to claim the attention of the coast-gunner; for, apart from its great rarity, it is a frequenter of inland marshes and the borders of shallow lakes and broads, where it feeds on the larvæ of various water insects, etc. As its name indicates, it possesses for its size the longest legs of any wading bird, which together with its white body and black wings render it very conspicuous. The only pair of stilts I have seen in this country were flushed from the edge of Kingsbury Reservoir; for some reason this reservoir had been emptied of water for a time, leaving round the

channel made by the Brent River a large expanse of mud-flat, which for a time was a great attraction to plovers and sandpipers.

The legs of the stilt are in colour a bright vermilion red. In flight they extend far beyond the tail.

GREENSHANK

Though perhaps hardly meriting the term rare, the Greenshank is not at any time very common or numerous. It is generally met with in twos and threes in mid-September. Like many of our bird migrants it is here to-day and gone to-morrow.

There is as far as I know no recorded instance of the greenshank nesting in any part of England, but in the Highlands of Scotland, I believe, a few pairs remain to nest.

REDSHANK

This is quite one of our commonest wading birds, and as a nesting species it seems to be on the increase; in many parts, the numbers of nesting redshank bid fair to outnumber the local stock of home-nesting green plover.

Redshanks can be found nesting both on the high moors and on low-lying marsh land from the Border right down to the South Coast. I have found several nests at Walmer Pond (Hants).

Redshanks are numerous in a marsh country at almost all times of the year; odd birds can sometimes be found a long way inland on flooded water-meadows, etc.

DUSKY REDSHANK

This is a bird of Eastern range, and a somewhat rare visitor on migration, occurring chiefly in autumn. It is only when in full summer plumage that it deserves its name, at which time it is truly a handsome bird ; its dark smoke-coloured plumage making a delightful contrast to its bright red beak and legs. In its autumn and winter dress it might easily be passed over for a rather large and bright-coloured specimen of the common redshank.

YELLOWSHANKS

Both the Yellowshanks are very rare stragglers from North America. Naturalists have divided them into two sub-species, namely, the Greater and the Lesser Yellowshank. Of the latter some three or four specimens have been recorded from Cornwall and the West Coast of England.

All the yellowshanks which I have shot in Canada were of the lesser variety ; neat little birds, a trifle smaller than our English redshank, with bright lemon-coloured legs.

RUFFS AND REEVES

Ruffs are curious birds, and apart from the head-dress they assume in the spring, and their queer antics when fighting, they differ in several characteristics from closely allied species. For instance, they are polygamous, and the male birds (Ruffs) are fully one-third larger than the females (Reeves). In the spring the ruffs have

the habit of assembling themselves at particular "hills" in the marshes (a marsh hill is the very slight elevation above the surrounding level); here they "show off" to the reeves and spar with one another. Their fighting is to a great extent make-believe, and little damage is done.

No more than a century ago these birds were plentiful in the marsh and fen country of Norfolk and the Eastern counties; particularly along the valley of the Yare, where they nested in considerable numbers. They used to be considered a great delicacy, and large numbers were captured alive in nets, upon their arrival at their favourite "hills."

After they had been fattened for some days on bread and milk they commanded a high price.

It is only when in full spring plumage that the male birds assume the remarkable ear-tufts and ruffs from which they derive their name, showing such an endless variety of colour-schemes in black, chestnut, white and brown, that out of twenty or thirty birds hardly two will be found exactly alike.

In autumn and winter the ruffs have the same sober colouring of browns and greys as the reeves.

Ruffs are nowadays with us only as occasional visitors, on spring and autumn migration; though we may hope that with strict protection we may once again see them established in their old nesting haunts.

KNOT

The Knot is the smallest wading bird that is really worth the attention of the shore shooter ; but though small it must be confessed that he is excellent eating withal, being at times a perfect little ball of fat.

Knot visit us both on the spring and autumn migration and large flocks are present on the East Coast during the winter months.

The first knot to reach us in September are almost without an exception young birds, in pearly grey plumage, with a faint tinge of buff on their under parts ; but occasionally one meets with an old bird at the same season which has not yet moulted, and is still in his chestnut-coloured summer plumage.

On their first arrival knot are exceedingly tame and can be "walked up" on the open without the slightest difficulty. It is in fact quite easy at a range of only half a gun-shot to overlook a small party of knot resting on some pebbly ridge, so quietly do they sit, and so perfectly does their grey plumage harmonize with their surroundings.

On the Norfolk coast the knot collect in enormous flocks during the winter. They keep out on the open sands and are at these times wild enough, being practically unapproachable ; occasionally, however, they give the gunner a chance of scoring and as they fly in a dense mass a lucky shot will tell heavily.

The heaviest shot at knot that I have ever heard of was made on February 17th, 1901, by Tom Cringle of Wells, when he (in company with

another gunner) succeeded in getting a flying shot at an enormous gathering of knot with his punt gun, and put a pound or so of No. 3 shot right into the thick of them. As Cringle described it to me, "It fairly seemed to rain birds." In the result, in spite of many being snatched up and carried away by the big gulls, over six hundred birds were gathered, all of them knot except four or five redshank. So much for the record punt-gun shot, while as many as eighty have fallen to a single shot from a heavy shoulder-gun.

Knot may be shot on the open shore by a party of two or three guns walking in line, and spread out pretty wide. As soon as a flock is flushed, the gunners either squat or lie down, and keep calling to the birds not with an imitation of their own note, but with the grey plover's three-syllable whistle. In this way a flock of knot can often be persuaded to swing round, and give the opportunity for a shot, albeit at the "brown" and at very long range. I have seen birds punched out of a big flock, stone dead, at a hundred yards range, with an ordinary short-case 12-bore, but using "goose cartridges" loaded with BB shot. It is not a style of shooting that I ever cared much about, but instructive as showing the extreme range at which very big shot-pellets can be effective.

Nowadays we seldom seem to meet with the enormous gatherings of knot that might be seen some twenty years ago, when a flock at a distance of half a mile would for a moment give the impression of the smoke from a big steamer.

GREEN PLOVER

The Green Plover, Peewit, or Lapwing, is the most familiar and striking of our wading birds. It is widely distributed and can be found nesting on fresh marsh downs or arable land. During the last two or three years some amount of controversy has been raised over the vexed question of adequate protection for our home-nesting plovers ; it being generally asserted that their numbers have seriously diminished during recent years. In most places that I am acquainted with this is undoubtedly the case. There can, I think, be no doubt as to the chief reason of this state of affairs, which is the relentless persecution the birds undergo from those who gather plovers' eggs to supply the demands of the market ; though possibly a contributory cause can be found in the great numbers of winged vermin (such as carrion crows and egg-hunting rooks), which, during the war and since, have increased to an extraordinary extent.

The authorities of several counties have now taken the well-meaning, but useless and vexatious, step of protecting the green plover throughout the year, and yet allowing its eggs to be taken as before !

To extend the protection of plover to the winter months cannot have any practical effect on the position of our home-nesting birds, because by October they will have migrated south and their places have been taken by thousands of foreign migrants from the north-east. The only result of such ill-considered legislation is to deprive many

a humble coast-gunner of legitimate sport and profit. In winter-time, at all events (taking one season with another), there is no lack of plover on our marshes, and since the birds themselves are already protected everywhere in the close season, the only practical step which can be taken for their further protection is to make the sale of their eggs illegal once and for all.

STONE-CURLEW

The Stone-curlew or Norfolk plover has little of the nature of a shore-bird, and both in appearance and habits bears a much closer resemblance to the bustards than to any of the plovers.

Stone-curlews are summer visitors to this country, and nest very sparingly on some of the stony brecks and heaths of Norfolk and Suffolk, and also in parts of the Hants and Sussex downland. The only place where I have seen these birds at all close to a marsh country is the waste of shingle beach between Lydd and Dungeness. When disturbed, stone-curlew have the habit of running forward in a crouching attitude before they take flight. A notable point about them is their large, bright yellow eyes.

DOTTEREL

The true Dotterel (sometimes called the "land" dotterel) is a moorland-nesting bird which passes along the East and South Coast on spring and autumn migration. As a resident it has always

been particularly scarce, and as a migrant it is in these days hardly less rare. In the old days before shooting in the spring months was prohibited by law, long-shore gunners would keep a sharp look-out for parties of migrating dotterel. These birds, though never very numerous, were either so tired on their arrival or so absurdly tame that a small flock, once located, was often wiped out to the very last unit. The chief difficulty, we are told, was to avoid losing sight of the birds while reloading (a serious proceeding in the days of muzzle-loaders).

This difficulty I can myself endorse, with regard to a small party of dotterel which I happened to meet with on Pagham Beach, September, 1925. In fact, so well did their quiet, dun-coloured plumage harmonize with the prevailing background of brown shingle that I found it no easy matter to make them out ; and if it had not been for one individual who gave the show away by lifting a wing, I might have overlooked them altogether. It is interesting, but hardly profitable, to conjecture what rare birds may pass over the home counties, and over London itself, unnoticed and unrecorded, for the best possible of reasons that when migrating they are flying far too high for recognition. In my father's collection is a dotterel in perfect spring plumage, which was killed by striking the telegraph wires near Holmwood Station. Amongst other birds, which at different times met with the same fate, were a stone-curlew and a water-rail !

RING-DOTTEREL

The active little Ring-dotterel is one of our most familiar shore birds, and though nowhere particularly numerous it can be found in small parties wherever there is a stretch of sandy beach with a few brackish pools or backwaters adjacent.

It lays its eggs on the shingle only just above high-water mark. It can hardly be considered worth the attention of any but a schoolboy gunner.

TURNSTONE

The Turnstone is another of the smaller shore birds which is hardly worth powder and shot.

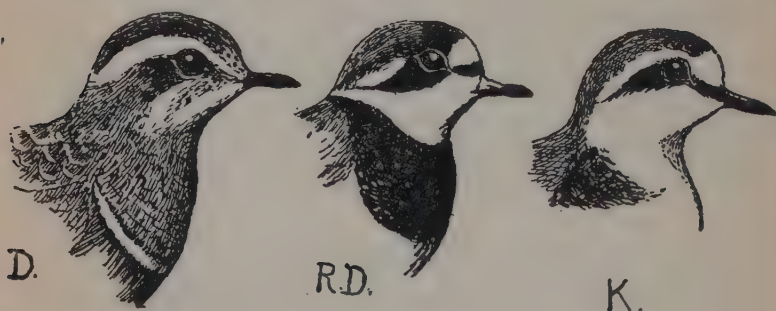
Though never numerous, it is not uncommonly met with in little parties of four or five, frequenting shingle banks and strips of stony foreshore.

In full summer plumage the turnstone is a strikingly handsome bird, with chestnut-mottled upper plumage and breast marbled with black and white.

KENTISH PLOVER

This is a neat little bird closely related to the dotterels. In size it is a trifle smaller than the common ring-dotterel, from which it differs in having an incomplete black gorget, a fawn-coloured patch on the forehead and lighter colouring generally. The legs and feet are black.

The Kentish Plover is a summer visitor, and very rare except on one small portion of the Kentish coast, where some few pairs nest every year. The nest is merely a hollow on the shingle.



GOLDEN PLOVER

The Golden Plover is a handsome game-looking bird, wonderfully swift on the wing, and as a delicacy hardly surpassed by any bird on the list of game or wildfowl. Gold plover visit us on the autumn migration, sparingly in September, but later on in increasing numbers ; and during a mild season large numbers pass the whole winter with us.

In Norfolk the gold plover seem to have a decided preference for the upland fallows and do not frequent the fresh marshes in any considerable numbers until the higher-lying land has been stiffened by one or two good frosts. Then for a day or two sport with them may become quite brisk ; but a really hard frost will soon banish

them away elsewhere, presumably to the south and west. They do not reappear later on in the season however mild the weather.

If we compare the very small numbers of gold plover which are shot on the South Coast in these degenerate days with the recorded bags of sixty or seventy years ago, we are forced to the conclusion that in this part of the country at least they are now much less numerous than in former years. I am unable to suggest a reason for this apparent local scarcity of the gold plover ; for in other parts such as the Border counties they seem to be holding their own.

A few pairs of gold plover nest on the fells of the North Country. In spring the gold plover assumes a black breast.

It is a curious fact that these home-nesting birds never attain to such complete summer plumage as is shown by the migrating plover which pass northwards along our coasts in May.

The golden plover differs from his relations in possessing only three toes.

GREY PLOVER

The Grey Plover is only known to nest in the barren tundras of the farthest Arctic regions, and in range of migration it is practically circum-polar.

A sprinkling of grey plover appear on our coasts for a few days' sojourn about the middle or end of May ; at this time they are in full summer

plumage, when they must be classed among the most handsome of our shore birds.

Flocks of young birds arrive in September about the same time as the godwits. These young grey plover have a yellowish tinge, which gives them a close resemblance to golden plover. From these they can always be distinguished, when in the hand, by having beneath the wing a bar of dusky feathers (which in golden plover are white), and also by possessing a small hind toe.

The grey plover which are met with in mid-winter have lost the yellow tint, and their colour-scheme is then a uniform mottling of smoky grey.

Grey plover are never found in large flocks like the golden plover. A little company of ten or fifteen is the largest number that I have ever seen together.

Apart from this they are rather sociable birds and often found in close companionship with knots and godwits. A single plover can sometimes be seen accompanied by two or three dunlin, hence the latter have been called by old writers the "plovers' page."

During a recent shooting trip to Pagham Harbour, a double shot at a small party of wading birds resulted in two godwits falling to the right barrel, while the left secured a grey plover and a little dunlin which was flying close beside him.

The note of the grey plover is a clear tri-syllable "tee-ou-ee," while that of the gold plover is

shorter and softer and may be spelt "too-eep."

OYSTER-CATCHER

This bird is rather local in its choice of country, but on the whole it is pretty widely distributed round our coasts. Living entirely on small shell-fish, it is seldom or never met with on the salt marshes and mud-flats beloved of curlews, red-shanks, and other soft-billed waders.

With this limitation I have found oyster-catchers in a surprising variety of places; from the wide sand-flats and shell-strewn beaches of the South and East Coasts to the limpet-covered rocks at the foot of the Great Orme headland, in the West. As a nesting species the oyster-catcher is rather a rare bird with us.

It lays its large, handsomely-marked eggs in the merest apology of a nest, which is usually a slight hollow in the turf, decorated with a few pieces of cockle-shell.

Sussex gunners call the oyster-catcher by the quaint name of olive (? St. Olaf's bird).

Though perhaps undeserving of special pursuit, an oyster-catcher is well worth a cartridge; as a rocketing shot it can "travel some," and young birds at all events are quite good eating.

At low tide oyster-catchers scatter themselves in twos and threes over their feeding grounds; but during high water they will be found collected together, often in flocks of considerable size,

resting on some shingle ridge, or reef of low rocks. The best time for a fighting shot at them is a little before high tide or again on the first of the ebb.



CHAPTER XIV

SHORE BIRD SHOOTING

CURLEW SHOOTING ON THE TIDE—OLD FRED BARRETT—
SHOOTING FROM A GUNNING PUNT—A WILD-GOOSE
CHASE—PLOVER SHOOTING

DURING the earlier part of the shooting season the keen wildfowler may be puzzled at times as to how he shall profitably spend the interval between the opening of the season and the arrival of wildfowl from abroad.

A few early mallard may have been secured during the first week or two of August, and by mid-October we may expect the grey geese to be arriving in satisfactory numbers (to be followed by plover, duck, and wigeon); but what sport can be found along shore in the meanwhile?

The answer is curlew shooting.

Curlews have rightly been reckoned the wariest of shore birds (in which respect they can well bear comparison with the proverbial wild goose); nevertheless there are ways and means by which a considerable amount of sport can be got with them.

It is the habit of curlews during low water to scatter over the mud flats in small feeding parties; then as the tide flows they draw together to the higher muds, and when finally pushed out of their

feeding-grounds altogether by the encroaching tide, they flight off in good-sized flocks to some quiet island or promontory where they sit in massed battalions waiting until the ebb allows them to make a return flight to their feeding grounds.

Accordingly one of the best ways of planning out a satisfactory raid on the curlew is to find out their favourite resting-place during high water, and there dig a gunning-pit or construct some other suitable hiding-place in which to wait in ambush until the rising tide puts them on the move.

This can generally be managed with some degree of comfort, as curlew are fond of choosing a warm sunny shingle-bank or the sheltered side of a mud island for their siesta during the time that they are unable to feed.

I need hardly say that whatever form of cover is selected for your ambushade, the utmost care must be taken to make it inconspicuous and in harmony with the prevailing colour of the background. As a rule it will not be found profitable to wait for the curlew on their feeding-grounds, but good sport can sometimes be got with them as they flight over some headland. If there are more places than one which the curlew are likely to visit during high water, you should arrange, if possible, for other guns to be posted there, for by so doing, the chances of sport for the whole party will be greatly increased.

In some localities good curlew shooting can only be got for a day or two round about new moon and full moon, that is during the spring tides,

for at other times the tides are not big enough to submerge a sufficient acreage of flats, and the birds remain scattered about over the higher muds, consequently nothing effective can be done with them.

Curlew occasionally vary their habits by flying up into the fields in search of worms, beetles, etc. ; when flying across the land they fly at a good height and give the most sporting shots.

September may be reckoned the best month for curlew shooting, besides which there is the consideration that later on in the season, there are worthier fowl to pursue. In September again there are other shore birds to be got on the mud-flats, such as whimbrel, godwits and oystercatchers, which add variety to the bag and help to fill up a thin day with curlew.

As a general rule it will be found that the best shooting is got in a flowing tide, and about an hour before high water, but it is always well to have patience and hold your ground through high water and well on into the ebb, for one can never foretell the day's luck.

To give a single instance, one first of September I had planned a shoot on the flowing tide, having posted myself on a small mud island frequented by the curlew.

As the tide flowed up, not a single bird came to my island, and I felt almost tempted to retire in despair, but being cut off by the high water, I had perforce to wait for the tide to fall (and very fortunately as it turned out) ; for on the very first of the ebb the curlew turned up in good numbers

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circling round my hiding-place, and in a few minutes' shooting I had ten of them down in the water.

While waiting in the gunning-pit during high water, you will at times get a chance of bagging a sheld-duck, or of taking a few sporting shots at rocketing cormorants.

If you are shooting from a small island it is advisable to have a boat standing off at some little distance to pick up birds that have fallen in the tideway, for want of which half the bag may well be lost. A good dog is most useful at times, although for this sort of shooting not at all times a convenient companion. He must be a first-class water dog and under perfect control, or he will be more trouble than he is worth.

Early in the season odd curlew can be whistled up to within shot by a concealed gunner who is adept at calling them.

Old Fred Barrett, a well-known professional wildfowler (who has years ago joined the great majority), was a wonder at calling up curlew; he would actually call up the birds by using their alarm note. His *modus operandi* was as follows: Well hidden in a creek we would wait for flighting curlew; when a small flock appeared, a clear call-note or two would attract their attention, and then with the help of a home-made tin "squeaker" the old man would start screaming like a curlew in very bad trouble, at the same time letting his handkerchief flutter just above the edge of the creek. The effect was magical; the curlew would come swooping in with stiff wings

to investigate the trouble, only to be greeted with a devastating broadside. On one occasion Barrett had called up a goodly bunch of curlew, and having killed a couple I observed the old man looking at me with considerable disappointment. I said, "What's the matter, Barrett, I've got a right and left." "Don't you talk about no rightses and leftses," answered he. "Hap, yow'd shot along o' that there great ringe o' them I'd ha' looked to see fower or foive tumble, that I would indeed."

There are also other occasions when his own curiosity or indignation will lead to the curlew's undoing. A little dog running along the muds—particularly if carrying a bird—is a pretty sure draw, but the sight of a dead relative or two bobbing in the tideway (with perhaps a winged bird screaming mournfully) is the deadliest lure for curlew that I know, and the gunner may find himself for a few moments in a very warm corner indeed, with a perfect maelstrom of birds swooping round him at all angles and paces, the chief difficulty being to load up fast enough.

Wild as they are at most times, I have on occasions succeeded in walking up to a bunch of curlew without very much trouble; this has happened either during a storm of wind and rain or at a time of sharp frost. At such times curlew will huddle together under the lee of a bank or take shelter in long rough grass, and with caution it is possible to steal a march on them.

A pleasant way of bagging a few curlew and other shore birds in early autumn is to go out in

a gunning-punt or small boat, accompanied by a man to manage the boat and help retrieve your birds. The most favourable time is when there is a pretty big tide about midday.

A start can then be made at fairly low water, and the various creeks and flats of the shooting ground explored as the tide flows; setting to little bunches of plover and waders in approved style, and matching your craft and "puntsmanship" against the wily old curlews and sheld-duck. Later on as the muds begin to go under and birds are put on the wing by the rising tide, you can push the punt into some convenient creek and get flighting shots at curlew and various waders, or if you have a gunning-pit or other ambush ready, you can occupy it for the shooting; while your man stands off in the punt to help in the pick-up, or goes away on a roving commission to stir up the birds from other grounds. Working in this way a nice little bag can be got together, and many an odd bird secured. Your bag may well be a mixed one, for besides curlew and waders you may have the luck to fall in with a small bunch of teal or wigeon which being new arrivals are "gentle" enough to permit the punt being worked to within gun-shot.

When shooting from the punt a heavy gun is useful on account of its ranging power.

The gun which I used a great deal for this sort of work was a long-case 10-bore which later on in the season was my stand-by for flighting geese; but now and again still heavier metal might have served me better.

One day in early September I was out in the punt on Breydon Water. Sport with waders, etc., had been by no means brisk, and I was having a look round with the glasses when I suddenly spotted a solitary grey goose swimming among some big gulls in the open channel. My puntsman was at first incredulous, but a peep through the glasses convinced him.

"That's a fowl sure enough," he exclaimed and not seeing any plan which promised better, we flattened down, and set to him in approved style. Alas for our hopes; the gulls taking an early departure aroused the suspicions of our goose, and at a good hundred yards (a hopeless range for the 10-bore) he was up and off, unshot at.

For shooting from a pit and practically all work ashore, I prefer the handier 12-bore; using 5 or 4 shot for curlew, plovers, etc., and keeping a few heavier cartridges in reserve for chance meetings with heavier fowl.

To show the variety of shore birds that can be shot in a day's punting with a shoulder gun I will quote the following extracts from my game book:

Day No. 1.—Chichester Harbour.

1 sheld-duck, 1 teal, 2 oyster-catchers, 2 curlew,
4 whimbrel, 2 redshanks, 4 green plover.

Day No. 2.—The same.

9 curlew, 1 heron, 2 redshank, 2 greenshank,
1 turnstone.

Day No. 3.—Breydon Water.

1 curlew, 7 knot, 5 grey plover, 6 dunlin.

When punt shooting it is decidedly preferable

to work on a flowing tide, for should the punt run aground when setting to birds, the tide will soon float her again, and you can then carry on as before, but once aground on the ebb, it is a case of thus far and no farther, unless indeed you can shove off, go astern and find a deeper channel.

On Breydon Water, where the muds are smooth and firm, it is a fairly easy job when stranded to get out of the punt and "launch" her over the muds to the nearest channel; but in many other harbours, etc., where the muds are soft and treacherous or much encumbered with weeds, launching is impossible; and if caught stranded on the ebb you run the risk of being forced to wait for next tide to float the punt.

The punts commonly used by the Chichester Harbour gunners are built very long and narrow, and fitted with outriggers for rowing; as may be supposed they can be made to travel exceedingly fast.

When working the deeper channels a centre-board is a useful addition, making a tremendous improvement in the sailing capability of the punt.

The advantage of a very fast punt may not be apparent at first; but when dealing with slow-rising fowl such as swans, geese or sheld-ducks an extra turn of speed, whether sailing or paddling, will often prove your trump card and enable you to rush the fowl before they have time to make much headway.

The Breydon punts are built with comparatively more beam, and though lacking the speed of the Sussex punts, they certainly possess the compen-

sating advantages of greater steadiness and comfort.

In the course of a walk in the fresh marshes a few plover can generally be bagged, and likewise when shore shooting from pit or punt. In September, when the inland pastures and fallows are still pretty dry, there is often some sort of a flight of peewits on to the mud flats according to the state of the tide ; but more businesslike fighting will be got later on in the season, i.e., in October and November, when the foreign plover are dropping in from overseas.

In West Norfolk both gold plover and peewits have the habit of fighting out from the land at dusk to spend the night on the tops of the salt marshes, and returning to the fields next morning at about eight or nine o'clock. If the morning is foggy or a good westerly breeze is blowing, some fair sport should be got ; but this fighting can only be done during the period of dark nights : for when there is a moon, the plover will stay on the land all night.

On some days there is a regular " passage flight " of plover pretty well all day long, doubtless of fresh arrivals from abroad ; and at the beginning of a spell of hard weather—particularly if there is snow—you may expect a general movement of plover all along the coast.

The evening fighting does not give scope for very much sport, though it certainly offers the most puzzling shooting. The birds come dipping down out of the sky and skimming along hardly a foot above the marsh tops. For evening plover-

fighting, the Wells gunners are wont to hide themselves at dusk in deep creeks on the salt marshes ; and when several guns happen to have posted themselves fairly close to one another, what with low-flying birds and the bad light, the shooting can be a little bit dangerous ; the gold plover especially flying so low and showing up so little as to be almost invisible.

Morning or day-time fighting is far better sport ; but even in broad daylight peewits can give anything but easy shooting. Their big flapping wings and apparently laboured progress against a head wind make them look regular "sitters," particularly when compared to the swift arrow-like flight of the gold plover. But I am sure that taking one shot with another the peewits are little less difficult to bag than their more game-looking cousins : and when they come bobbing along, now singly, now in small bunches, opening their ranks and closing them again, and dipping and twisting with every gust of wind, the best of shots will be hard put to it to show a decent average of dead birds against his empty cases.

At the same time it must be admitted that for sheer speed gold plover take a lot of beating (rivalling teal in this respect); and on a calm day they fly at a great height. At times a flock will bunch up very close in flight, and kills of a dozen at one shot have been recorded. A remarkable shot was brought off by Percy Barrett of Wells in 1923 ; when shooting at a small trip of five plover (flying rather low) he secured the whole five with one cartridge.

I have had some good days with flighting plover on the fresh marshes which border on the River Yare near Buckenham Ferry.

On days when one was lucky enough to strike a passage flight, fresh flocks would be passing along continually and usually at no great height.

Peewits prefer a marsh that is flooded to the depth of an inch or two ; so (failing a flight) this is the place to wait for them in the day-time. A few decoys (stuffed birds or fresh-killed ones), set up head to wind as all decoys should be, will help the bag.

If the marshes are very dry it may be found possible to flood an acre or so by damming a neighbouring dyke, and at the same time contrive to leave a small island on which the gunner can wait in ambush with his decoys set up around him. A marsh gateway makes a convenient hide for shooting from ; but if there are no gates handy a small blind can be built with two or three wattle hurdles interwoven with dead grass or reeds : these may be set up some time before shooting to let the birds get accustomed to them, in which case " 'ware cattle." It is no joke to arrive at your shooting-place only to find that some playful bullocks have been amusing themselves, knocking over and tossing about your carefully prepared hide.

Compared with the gold plover and peewits the grey plover give but little sport, and well deserve the name of sand-plover by which they are known on some parts of the coast. They never come inland, either to upland fallow or fresh

marsh, but frequent the most seaward parts of the saltings and the open shore, where they are to be found in the company of godwits, dunlin and the like.



CHAPTER XV

WOODCOCKS AND SNIPE

WOODCOCK SHOOTING—SNIPE SHOOTING—THE SMALLER SANDPIPERS

To include the woodcock in a treatise on wild-fowl shooting may savour somewhat of a trespass on the game preserves; as for all practical purposes woodcock shooting in England is an incidental part of covert shooting, and for myself I must confess that my only acquaintance with the woodcock is as a welcome addition to the bag of pheasants and other game.

True it is that towards the end of October, when bird migration from the Eastward is in full swing, a woodcock or two may find its way into the bag of the shore-shooter, particularly one who makes a practice of hunting his dog through any low bushes and such-like along the shore; but in this respect I have never been lucky.

In my young days I used to do a good deal of shore tramping along the denes between Yarmouth and Caister, and also in the "meal marsh" country near Cley, always keeping an eye open for a possible chance at a woodcock; but I cannot remember flushing a single bird within sight of salt water.

From a sporting point of view I consider the

woodcock a decidedly over-rated bird. Granted that a 'cock twisting in and out of thick cover is hard enough to hit, but quite as often one will fly out as low and straight as an owl ; the principal handicap to such shooting being due to a right consideration of the safety both of the beaters and one's fellow guns.

In short my great " crab " against the woodcock is that it never by any chance gives a really high sporting shot. I well remember a particularly nice day I had with a friend in Dorsetshire not far from Charmouth, where in addition to the pheasants there was a fair sprinkling of woodcock, and the ground was all in favour of high shots.

We were driving a series of coombes, i.e., long valleys shut in by sloping hills which were clothed with dwarf oak and other thick cover. Standing in the open one could see 'cock after 'cock flushed on the crest of the hill. The pheasants would gallantly face the music, sailing across the open valleys and giving us the grandest of tall shots ; not so the woodcock. These would come forward hugging the cover all the way down the hill, and then turn in and pitch again ; to be finally ejected, at the end of the drive, at approximately the height of the beaters' hats.

It has been asserted that a woodcock always gets up silently, and also that a winged bird never runs. Both statements may perhaps be accepted as generally correct ; but on various occasions I have seen a woodcock rise with almost as much wing-clatter as a cock pheasant, and again

a winged bird that has run a considerable distance and given the dog a sharp hunt.

Woodcock are known to nest in several parts of Sussex. It may, however, be doubted if many of these home-bred birds stay with us long enough to augment our own game supply ; and I think it is most probable that they depart for France or Spain before the leaf is off.

SNIPE AND SNIPE SHOOTING

To the majority of sportsmen snipe shooting means walking up the birds, and nothing else ; and as such the subject has been pretty thoroughly dealt with by various authors.

It has often been stated that the snipe shooter should always work his ground down-wind in order that he may get his birds turning towards him as they jump into the wind. The theory of it seems sound enough, but I hesitate to endorse it for practice on every occasion.

When snipe are wild and jumpy a down-wind approach on the part of man and dog can hardly fail to spring them at a long distance, and the first shot fired may flush a dozen or more clean out of range. Again, on much of the snipe ground that I have walked over, the line of approach has been so circumscribed by marsh dykes, deep ground, etc., that without an infinite amount of trouble it would have been difficult to vary it in any way, either for considerations of wind or any other reason.

Snipe will generally lie closest during a sharp frost ; and on the other hand they are likely to

be wild and hard to approach when there is flood water standing on the tops of the marshes. Under the last conditions they are not only apt to spring together but to be found flying in wisps ; and when this is the case little can be done with them, short of organizing a drive.

Snipe driving is excellent fun and I wonder that it is not more often tried. High-flying snipe present a tiny mark at the best, and in a wind can give the most difficult and sporting shots. A comparatively narrow strip of ground is the most suitable for a drive, as it is at all times difficult to foresee how the birds will behave ; and after flying forward for a few yards they are very apt to turn off in a different direction. For the same reason it is best not to attempt too long a drive.

At times numbers of snipe may be found resting on the floating reed ronds and hovers of a broad, and here driving is the best way of dealing with them, unless one is shooting from a boat.

I have in mind a particular broad of no great extent, where we were almost certain of putting up some dozens of snipe from the reeds. Occasionally we found them flying in big wisps of twenty or thirty birds, like bunches of dunlin.

I suppose most country men are familiar with the curious bleating noise made by snipe in the nesting season. The sound is produced by the bird while making a downward swoop, and is caused by a vibration of air through the wing and tail feathers.

Compared with most other wading birds, snipe choose rather a damp situation for their nests,

which are often placed in the merest tuft of grass, only just above the surrounding ouse and water.

Jack snipe occur mostly during hard weather. I have met with a few on salt marshes where it is rather uncommon to find a full snipe. The Jack may be considered hardly large enough to be worth a shot, but as walking up snipe is mostly snap-shooting, I have sometimes killed one in mistake for a full snipe.

The Great Snipe I have never met with. It must be considered a very rare visitor from the Continent. Size apart, it can be distinguished from an ordinary "full" snipe by having the breast and underparts spotted all over like a woodcock.

SANDPIPERS

The smaller sandpipers will hardly claim the serious attention of a wildfowler unless he is also a collector, to whom the acquisition of a single rare specimen is more than a whole bag full of common birds.

Accordingly I shall deal with them briefly and more or less collectively.

As a family the sandpipers are the neatest and most graceful of birds. They are all migratory in their habits, and, with the exception of the Dunlin and Common Sandpiper, none of them have been known to nest in this country.

For the sake of convenience I shall divide them into two groups namely, marsh sandpipers and shore sandpipers.

My first group consists of the Green Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, and Common Sandpiper, none

of which are ever found upon the open sea shore, but along the margins of brackish backwaters or freshwater streams and ponds; and are generally flushed singly or in pairs. The Green Sandpiper is a graceful little bird with its upper plumage of dark mottled olive colour and white tail. When flushed it springs quickly like a snipe, uttering a sharp cry. Seen on the wing it has a very black and white appearance; the white rump being particularly noticeable. Wherever you have once met with a green sandpiper you are likely to flush another from the identical spot, though it may be at an interval of years. I have met with them both in spring and early autumn.

For a wading bird the green sandpiper is said to make strange choice of a nesting site, laying its eggs in the deserted nest of a missel thrush.

The Wood Sandpiper is a somewhat scarcer bird than the last named, which it much resembles both in colouring and habits.

The Common Sandpiper, often called by the name of "summer snipe," arrives in this country in early spring. It can be seen running quickly along the edge of a stream or dyke, flirting up its tail and presently flying off, low and straight over the water, with a short piping cry. If winged, or when pursued by a hawk, it will both swim and dive. It has also a habit of perching on rails and posts.

All the "marsh" sandpipers show little or no change between their summer and winter plumage.

Of the shore-haunting sandpipers the most typical and by far the most numerous is the Com-

mon Dunlin, called on different parts of the coast by the names of purre, oxbird, and stint. On many a long and tedious wait for ducks or curlew, I have been entertained by the sight of endless clouds of dunlins, swooping round some favourite bank at high water ; each flock showing up like a dark cloud which turns to shimmering silver as the birds wheel in perfect order, bringing into view their light-coloured under parts. A few pairs of dunlin are found nesting along the Border country ; elsewhere they are migratory in spring and autumn, and common throughout the winter months.

In spring plumage the dunlin assumes a lower waistcoat of smoky black, each feather thinly bordered with white, and the back and shoulder plumage tinged with rust colour.

The Curlew Sandpiper is about the same size as the dunlin, which it closely resembles when in autumn and winter plumage, but from which it can be distinguished by its white upper tail-coverts. It is a bird of the widest geographical range, nesting in the Arctic regions and wintering as far South as parts of Africa and Southern Asia. In spring, at which time its plumage is more or less completely suffused with red, it is a rare bird ; and a perfect specimen is a prize to a collector. Young birds in the grey-brown dress of autumn are not at all uncommon.

The active little Sanderling is a common shore-bird on the East Coast, though I have never seen more than half a dozen together. As its name implies it frequents the sandiest parts of the fore-

shore, where it may be seen running out into the shallows to pick up some minute sand-hopper, as a wave recedes ; and retreating again, nimble as a mouse, before the arrival of the next wave.

In its winter plumage it is the whitest of all our smaller wading birds. In summer it has the whole upper parts closely mottled with rust colour and black, each feather tipped with white. A few sanderlings seem to stay with us all through the winter.

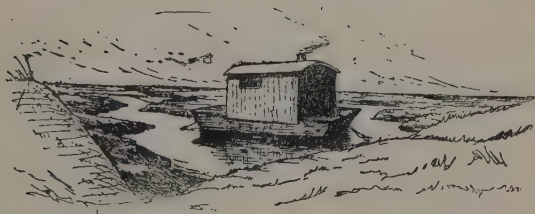
The Purple Sandpiper, though hardly to be termed rare, is distinctly uncommon on the South and East Coasts. It is fond of a rocky shore. I have a single specimen shot on the sands at Stiffkey.

The Little Stint is our smallest British wading bird. It is an occasional but irregular visitor to the East Coast. I have twice killed one of these tiny birds when shooting at larger waders.

The remaining sandpipers on the British list must all be written down as rare and occasional stragglers from abroad, and as such of great interest to a naturalist ; but as I can make no claim to a personal acquaintance with any one of them, and a detailed description of each bird may be found in any complete work on British ornithology, it will be sufficient if I give their names only, which are as follows : the Pectoral Sandpiper, Bonaparte's Sandpiper, American Stint, Bartram's Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, and Temminck's Stint.

Into the same category as the above I would

bring such purely accidental wanderers to our shores as the Caspian and Sociable Plovers, Red-breasted Snipe, and Killdeer Plover, also the Pratingcoles and Cream-coloured Courser.



CHAPTER XVI

OTHER WATER BIRDS

COOTS AND MOORHENS—WATER RAILS—PHALAROPES—
HERON—BITTERN—CRANE, STORK AND SPOONBILL

BOTH Coots and Moorhens are held in no great esteem by the majority of sportsmen ; but in some ways they deserve a better reputation. It is the natural habit of both these birds to fly low and hug the water, but coots at all events, can fly high and fast enough under compulsion ; and if cornered by a line of boats, will mount up and give most sporting shots.

In years gone by an annual coot drive on a large scale used to be held on Hickling Broad ; and as all comers were welcome to join in the sport, the fixture was considered something of a public festival. The guns available were divided into two parties ; one party manned the boats whose business it was to sweep the water in line, while the rest of the guns surrounded some bay or section of the Broad towards which the birds were driven. In this way large numbers of coots (being reluctant to rise until compelled to do so) were enclosed between the two lines of shooters ; and finding themselves trapped would rise and fly round in all directions in their endeavour to regain the open water. The shooting is said to have been a little dangerous at times ; while the

total bag would be counted by hundreds, and sometimes mounted into close on four figures. These public coot drives are nowadays a thing of the past, as the shooting is all in private hands ; but the same method of shooting is employed both at Hickling and elsewhere. I believe the only place where the Hickling records for coot shooting have been equalled is Slapton Ley in South Devon.

When the inland broads and lakes are frozen, the coots take their departure to the nearest ice-free water along the coast. At such times a good many fall to the Breydon gunners.

From a sporting point of view, moorhens must certainly be reckoned humbler game than coots, giving as a rule the easiest possible of shots. However, they are useful birds on which to train a young dog to work in the water.

Some retrievers show a curious dislike to lifting a woodcock ; but a dog which has been trained to retrieve moorhens is not likely to prove so fastidious.

It sometimes happens in the course of a day's covert shooting that a moorhen or two will come over the guns at quite a respectable height ; I have seen them climb to the top of a tree (mounting from branch to branch like a parrot) and so launch themselves off at a fair elevation.

As table birds I consider that moorhens are much neglected. Young birds are really first-class eating.

So far as my observation goes, coots always nest "awash" ; but moorhens, though usually

nesting close down to water, have been known to choose quite a lofty site. The highest moorhen's nest I ever found was built in a spruce fir about fifteen feet from the ground; a year or two afterwards a pair of sparrow-hawks nested in the same tree.

WATER RAIL

There is little to be said about water rails. They are excellent eating but give practically no sport. They fly low and for a short distance, and can hardly ever be flushed a second time by the most painstaking dog.

PHALAROPES

Phalaropes are quaint little birds, rare wanderers from the far North. Their lobed or fringed feet, coupled with their habit of swimming, suggest relationship to the coot; but in flight they might well be mistaken for some sort of sandpiper. They resemble the wading birds in having a distinct summer and winter plumage. There are two species of phalarope on the British list: the Red-necked Phalarope which is found nesting in the Orkneys and Hebrides, and the Grey Phalarope, an accidental visitor in autumn and winter. The latter derives its name from its winter colouring, as in the summer its plumage is for the most part a bright chestnut red. Of the two species the red-necked is decidedly the rarer bird, at all events on the East and South Coasts.

HERONS

Whether herons should be regarded as interesting birds worthy of strict preservation, or as vermin pure and simple, is a question which depends entirely on the point of view.

Certainly the heron is a noble-looking bird, and although I have shot one now and again, when I have had use for one, I would never go out of my way to do so; and I should be sorry to see the heron disappear from our marshlands.

On the other hand, owners of trout streams, etc., can hardly be expected to look upon the heron with much favour.

In the Eastern counties, where trout streams for the most part are not, and there are eels and coarse fish in abundance, it is probable that herons do little harm; elsewhere perchance a different tale might be told.

In any case most things are fish that come to the "old harnser's" net, including eels, frogs, water voles and possibly young water fowl.

Considering his size, a heron is a wonderfully soft bird to shoot, and can be crumpled up with a charge of small shot in a way that is amazing.

The reason of this is abundantly clear, when we compare the loose feathering and light brittle bones of a heron with the solid compact frames and hard close-fitting plumage of geese and ducks.

Four pounds is quite a fair weight for a heron; the largest I have ever shot (which I have stuffed) scaled a trifle over six pounds.

A young bird can be made fairly palatable if skinned, and cooked with great care. I should feel

very dubious about trying to eat an old one. Old herons, by the way, take exceedingly good care of themselves ; their height enables them to keep a good look-out over a flat country.

A wounded heron should be approached with some caution, for he has a long reach, and can strike straight and hard. Herons are sociable birds, usually nesting together in a close company of half a dozen to sixty nests in one heronry.

For nesting purposes they select the oldest and tallest trees they can find. Scotch firs are their favourites, failing which oaks or some other sort of trees are chosen.

Of the various heronries which I have visited, a large and ancient one at Parham Park is situated on a clump of very old Scotch firs. At Walmer Pond, and Black Lake (near Tilford), the same sort of trees were chosen ; but both these heronries have been destroyed by the felling of the trees for timber, during the War.

At Windmill Hill, near Hurstmonceaux, the heronry is built in some tall beech trees.

Where sizable trees are lacking altogether, herons have been known to nest on a reed rond, or even out on an open shingle beach. As soon as the young birds are hatched, a heronry is a busy and noisy scene. All day long the old birds are flying backwards and forwards, planing down on to the nests, their necks bulging with fish for their clamouring youngsters, and launching off again for fresh supplies ; while now and again a passage of arms will take place between some champion of the herons and a marauding carrion crow.

The Purple Heron and Night Heron are both very rare stragglers from the Continent. I have not met with either bird in the flesh. It will suffice to mention their names only.

BITTERN

Little more than a century ago, the Bittern was sufficiently well known to deserve the epithet "common," and during the nesting season its strange booming cry was considered one of the typical sounds of marshland.

In an old book on English sport published about 1800 I find a print entitled "Bittern shooting" which suggests that at that time bitterns were looked upon as regular objects of pursuit when shooting in the fens.

British naturalists have for many years mourned over the bittern as one of our lost breeding birds ; but since the War, it is stated that two or three pairs have returned to nest in their old haunts in Norfolk. I cannot help thinking that (strange as it may seem) the Great War has been instrumental in bringing about the return of the bitterns ; as owing to the shortage of labour, the reeds were left uncut over large tracts of Broadland for a considerable time, and for the same reason there was a cessation of the continual pumping by which the marsh water is drawn off into the river channels.

Apart from the above the bitterns must still be looked upon as no more than rather accidental visitors, nearly always occurring in mid-winter and during a sharp spell of frost. In their movements bitterns are largely nocturnal, and spend

the hours of daylight skulking in the thickest reed-beds, from which they will only move when almost trodden upon.

When flushed they fly away low and straight, with head and neck drawn in and presenting the easiest of shots.

The only two bitterns I have seen alive were pushed out of some thick reeds on two separate occasions, while "picking up" after a duck shoot. They were allowed to depart unshot at.

CRANE, STORK AND SPOONBILL

Although none of these birds can properly be called wildfowl, they are too interesting to be passed over altogether without a brief survey.

With the exception of a very few isolated stragglers, the occurrence of cranes in England must be considered quite a matter of ancient history. Writers of two centuries ago agree in stating that although at that time cranes had for long ceased to breed in this country, they could still be found in large flocks in the fens of Cambridgeshire, during the winter; while the stork seems never to have been reckoned more than an accidental visitor.

Cranes are birds of the most sustained and powerful flight, traversing the sky in flocks like wild geese, and at an immense height. It may be for this very reason that they are less liable to be driven out of their course by rough weather, as often happens with the smaller and weaker migrants.

The case of the Spoonbill is somewhat different

to the two last-named, for it is seldom that a year passes without a visit to our East Coast of from two or three to a dozen or more of these fine birds.

The principal fowling grounds of Suffolk, Kent and Sussex have all contributed their share to the record of English spoonbills; but if there is one locality which is favoured by them above all others it is the mud-flats of Breydon Water, where in recent years as many as sixteen have been seen together at one time. Sir Thomas Browne of Norwich has placed it on record that in his time (about 1670) spoonbills nested in the heronries at Claxton and Reedham, and at Trimley in Suffolk.

Though individual birds have been reported in early autumn, spoonbills for the most part visit us during the month of May, remaining for a few days only before taking their departure elsewhere.



CHAPTER XVII

DOGS FOR WILDFOWLING

A REALLY good wildfowling dog must be hardy, active and intelligent, plucky and fond of water, and above all under perfect control.

He must be content to crouch patiently beside his master, ever on the alert, but making no attempt to move until permitted to do so.

Finally, when the time for action has arrived, he must have boldness and resolution to face any difficulty and discomfort in securing his birds.

Any dog which in himself combines all these qualities is one to treasure, though he be the queerest-looking mongrel that ever was pupped.

A headstrong or partially-trained dog may now and then be useful, but his services in retrieving will be dearly bought at the price of many a shot lost through his restlessness and want of discipline.

Again, a well-trained animal who is a little "soft" in character may make a pleasant enough companion at a partridge drive; but if inclined to "shut up" at the end of a tiring day, and refuse to face ice-cold water and other hardships at the very time when his services are most required, he will hardly be of much use to a coarse-weather wildfowler.

When it comes to suggesting a choice between the different breeds of gun-dogs, so much in fact

depends on individual temperament, that it is difficult to single out any particular breed in preference to the others.

In all the sporting breeds can be found dogs of outstanding merit and others that are absolutely worthless.

Just as a good horse cannot be a bad colour, so it may well be said that a good dog can hardly be a bad breed. Honours won on the show-bench are no criterion to a dog's value in the field, especially in the hard school of wildfowling.

At the present time Labradors and Flatcoated Retrievers are by far the most popular breeds of gun-dogs; and of the two it can safely be stated as a general rule that the Labrador dogs are the hardier and pluckier. Curly Retrievers seem to have lost their old-time popularity with all but a very few sportsmen.

A sturdy upstanding Field Spaniel of the Springer type makes a useful dog if he will take kindly to water, and he will be easier to stow in a boat or car than one of the larger breeds.

If there is one breed more than another in which aptitude for retrieving from water is a racial trait, it is the Irish Water Spaniel. The majority of water spaniels are keen active dogs with good noses, wonderfully clever at all work in the water, and not easily discouraged by mud, ice or rough cover.

On the other hand they are only too often excitable, headstrong and hard to control.

A cross between the Water Spaniel and Retriever may well turn out a more useful all-round dog

than the pure-bred Irishman; as such a one will often combine in a happy degree the dash and love of water inherent in the one parent, with the steady temperament and docility of the other.

Quite the best retriever I ever possessed was a small cross-bred bitch called "Mills." She was a handsome little dog, black in colour with a close curly coat. Her mother was pure Irish water-spaniel, that much of her pedigree was certain, but her parentage on the other side was "wrapt in mystery"; and as two of her own litter-brothers were fawn and smut coloured, I had good reason to suspect some very "outside" cross.

Mills was a wonderfully strong and plucky swimmer, and would fight her way out to a bird through a sea which might well have daunted many a more powerful dog.

In rough water she would duck under the breakers like an otter until she had made a safe offing, and retrieve to hand any bird from a goose to a stint. In more civilized surroundings she was perfectly steady at winged game and fur alike, and could be trusted to watch pheasants, etc., falling all round her, without attempting to move until told to "seek dead," upon which she would be off like a flash.

In succession to Mills I had a dog pup of hers who could make still smaller claim to aristocratic parentage. Wavy, as I called him, was in appearance very like a large Airedale terrier. He had inherited to the full his mother's love of the water,

but I never succeeded in bringing him to the same pitch of steadiness. Nevertheless I found him very useful, as he possessed to a superlative degree the qualities of pluck and intelligence. For pushing an outlying cock pheasant from thick cover Master Wavy had no equal ; he seemed to have acquired the knack of working round a running bird and driving it back over the gun.

Water he loved at all seasons. For his own amusement he would sometimes do a complete dive and bring up stones, etc., from the bottom of a pond ; and a winged duck or water-hen had to be pretty spry to escape him in its own element.

Occasionally one meets with a completely unbroken dog which none the less, of its own intelligence, will perform quite creditably in the field from the very first. An example of such a self-taught retriever was a sheep-dog which belonged to my brother Charles. Sancho was the only dog on the ranche ; he possessed his fair share of brains, but had never been trained to sport with the gun. However, as we were at the time badly in need of a dog for our duck shooting, one fine morning I resolved (but not too hopefully) to try out friend Sancho's capabilities as amateur retriever.

As it happened on that particular day, we were out none too early ; in fact it was broad daylight by the time we reached our shooting-ground. Lying out flat on the grass close to Pambrun's lake, with ducks of all sorts flying around, Sancho's colour (which was lemon and white)

proved far too conspicuous for the work in hand. Besides this, moved by pardonable but misjudged interest, he would keep popping up his head whenever a bunch of ducks seemed to be heading in to us. So finding the "fighting" outlook somewhat unpropitious, I resolved to try the fortunes of a tramp along the edge of the lake; and being joined by Charles, we set out together. Every now and then ducks would jump from the water, giving us a series of shots at thirty to forty yards' rise. Sancho was in high glee, splashing out through the shallows to recover the dead birds; and during the course of the morning he successfully retrieved to hand some fifteen or sixteen ducks of various sorts, which had fallen to our combined efforts.

An excitable, uncontrolled dog, in addition to being a nuisance, may conceivably become a danger, at any rate to himself.

One day, when shooting on the salt marshes near Wells, I was joined by a black retriever dog, which had followed me at a distance. As he refused to take himself off home, I suffered his presence, hoping for the best.

While waiting for shots at shore-birds, concealed in a deep creek, my volunteer sat beside me with exemplary patience, presently bringing in a plover which I had shot. The next chance was at a curlew, dipping low over the saltings, which I missed with the first barrel. At the shot the dog bounded up on to the top of the marsh, and, as it seemed to me, straight in front of my gun, at the very moment that I pulled the second

trigger. The charge must have missed him by inches only ; and as it happened, cut down the curlew all right. All's well that ends well ; but the incident gave me a bit of a scare all the same.

There are times when the very best of dogs are out of place and in fact a serious handicap to shooting ; as when lying out on the open sands, or in any place where there is a lack of cover, your dog will make one more object on the landscape to catch the attention of keen-sighted wild-fowl.

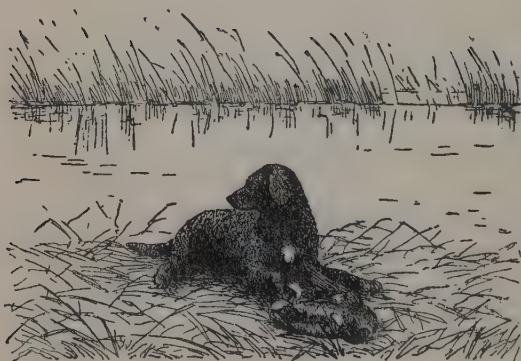
In a gunning-punt, where every inch of space is precious, even a small dog will take up valuable room ; and when you are working on an open estuary, he will hardly be of much service, after all. Moreover he will bring mud and water into the punt, and will soon get cold and miserable. Of course, when fighting close to deep water or thick cover, a good dog is indispensable.

A really smart retriever will make good use of his eyes as well as his nose. He will be quick to mark any bird which falls within his view, so that as soon as permission is given him, he can dash out straight to his point ; and then if the bird has moved, he will drop his head and get to work with his nose. Working in this way he will always be far ahead of a dog which on being told to "seek dead," potters aimlessly about, and has to be signalled further out and perhaps on to quite a different line, before he can take the wind of his bird.

A good chance of scoring a shot is often lost while the gunner is occupied in giving directions

to his dog ; which in many cases should not be necessary.

Some dogs that are used to flighting will prick up their ears at the sound of wings, and thus give warning of the approach of fowl which they had been the first to notice.



CHAPTER XVIII

BIRD MIGRATION

EFFECT OF BIRD PROTECTION—A TRIP TO HOLLAND—
THE SCHELDE ESTUARY—THE NAARDER MEER

THE whole subject of bird migration is both interesting and complex.

Thanks to the scientific exploration of recent years we have now some positive knowledge of to what part of the remote Arctic, such birds as godwits, knots and grey plover repair to nest, and can also trace with tolerable accuracy their subsequent journeyings to Southern Asia and even further; but there remain other points in bird migration on which we are still ignorant.

When we come to enquire exactly: how do birds migrate? at what speed and altitude do they fly? and above all by what sense can they direct their way through so many miles of space? we are answered by conjecture only and not by certified facts. A plausible answer to the last question might be that the oldest birds of a flock are guided by an acute sense of orientation helped by their own remembrance of previous migration flights, and are thus able to lead their less experienced families over the same aerial routes habitually travelled. In the case of some birds, and

especially the geese, which migrate together in well-ordered flocks, this explanation might well be the correct one; but what then of certain wading birds and others, in whose case the first migrant flocks to reach our shores in the autumn consist entirely of young birds of the year?

Here indeed, we are up against a problem which still awaits explanation, and our suggested solution of the difficulty fails us altogether. The fact remains, the first autumn migrants have arrived, and there is not a single old bird among them all.

Urged by some compelling sense of "Wanderlust" these youngsters, not more than four months old, have started on their travels weeks before their parents, and have safely reached their destination; directed by some hereditary instinct for migrating which we can only guess at. I have indeed wondered if this same hereditary instinct is not occasionally at fault, causing birds to revisit some particular part of the country which has long ceased to be suitable to their requirements.

One morning in April, 1913, I was riding along Ewood Common (near Newdigate) a wide stretch of dry grass and arable land which in years gone by was occupied by a considerable pond. Noticing a large number of brownish-looking birds sitting in the short grass, I edged my horse quietly up to them to discover that they were all snipe to the number of eighty or a hundred; the largest number I have ever seen together in a single wisp. At the very same place, but some five or six months

later, I was out with my brother Charles, shooting woodpigeons, when we were surprised by the appearance of a couple of cormorants, rather rare birds to find so far inland.

I do not suggest that anything can be proved from either incident. A passage-flight of snipe on migration might pitch down anywhere for a rest ; and cormorants it may be said are powerful birds, and have been known at times to travel a long distance inland. Still the thought persists. Could it have been some hereditary homing instinct which had brought such water-loving birds as snipe and cormorants to visit the ancient site of Ewood Pond, once the third largest sheet of water in Surrey ?

In mild seasons, the commencement of the spring migratory movement can be noticed as early as the last week of February ; at which time there is a gradual withdrawal to the Northward on the part of our winter wildfowl. The following month will witness the return of certain of our home-nesting birds such as curlew, plover, snipe, etc., which have been spending their winter in Southern Europe. It is not, however, until well towards the middle of May that the real rush of "through transit" migration begins. Then for a few days the sands and mud flats of our East and South Coasts are enlivened with flocks of wading birds of all sorts, all of them bound for their breeding-places in the farthest Arctic regions, and resplendent in full summer plumage.

On the South Coast I have generally found the

old saying "Twelfth of May is godwits' day" to be literally true; for punctually on or about the twelfth of the month there have appeared flocks of godwits "in the red," where but a day before there was hardly a bird to be seen.

About the same time the whimbrel arrive in full force, and their laughing cry can be heard everywhere about the saltings. Whimbrel are fairly numerous right up to the end of May. It is probable that their numbers are kept up by a succession of migrating flocks. In Sussex, I have found them equally abundant near Rye and Pevensey, and at the opposite corner of the county, namely the Selsey peninsula.

The godwits seem rather more local in their choice of country; a favourite resort of theirs is the wide stretch of sandy foreshore between Romney and Dungeness.

Now come small parties of knot, also in the red, with harlequin-coloured turnstones, and grey plovers with their black breasts and spangled backs, besides sanderlings and dunlins and many other waders; while in some specially favoured locality the naturalist may be rewarded by seeing a spoonbill or avocet.

The spring migration proper is over by the end of May or soon after, when the shore is left deserted as before until the time of the autumn migration.

Before the present era of bird protection, the time of the May migration was naturally looked forward to by shore shooters, eager to reap advantage from the sudden inrush of wading birds. In these days the gun must be laid aside in favour

of field-glasses and sketch book ; but to a true lover of birds this season of the year still retains its charm and interest.

Largely as the result of efficient protection in the close season, many of our home-nesting birds, which scarcely more than a decade or so ago were considered almost on the verge of extinction, have now fairly recovered their numbers. Amongst these could be mentioned some of our rarer ducks, besides such birds as great-crested grebes, sandwich terns, and bearded titmice, all of which in former years suffered persecution from collectors on account of their beauty and supposed rarity.

A much less agreeable result of indiscriminate protection is the great increase of gulls of all sorts.

Recently we have heard accounts from various sources of the havoc wrought by the larger gulls amongst nesting grouse and ducks, whose eggs and nestlings are sought out and devoured by these winged pirates (even the parent birds not always escaping).

In some places the black-headed gulls have increased enormously, nesting by thousands in places where a few years ago they could only be counted by scores ; so that ponds and meres have become foul and polluted by their numbers, and thereby rendered distasteful to ducks and teal.

The time has surely arrived when, in the interests of more valuable birds, the measure of protection now given to gulls should undergo drastic curtailment ; but this by the way.

While it may be agreed that the broad results of bird protection in this country have proved thoroughly satisfactory, there remain certain species of birds which hitherto have failed to take advantage of the protection and encouragement awaiting them, and must still be counted amongst our lost breeding birds. Of these, all, or nearly all, can be found nesting at no greater distance than the coast of Holland. Here are resident, in greater or less abundance, spoonbills and avocets, ruffs and black-tailed godwits, besides marsh harriers and black terns, and a host of commoner waterfowl.

To anyone who is interested in the home life of aquatic birds, I can hardly do better than suggest a trip across the North Sea in the month of May. The journey is in no way an arduous one ; much less so in fact than travelling to some of the more remote parts of our own islands ; and a wonderful variety of birds can be found within easy distance of certain large towns such as Flushing or Amsterdam.

I made a short trip to Holland shortly before the war, and although my experiences were limited to the islands of South Beveland and Schouwen in the Schelde estuary, and some of the marsh country between Amsterdam and Utrecht, I found the bird-life in these easily reached parts of the country rich enough to gratify the most exacting. What further ornithological treats await my discovery beyond the Zuider Zee in the more remote province of Friesland, I know not.

Starting from Queenborough about dinner-time, a night passage in one of the Zeeland Company's steamboats landed me at Flushing in the early hours of the following morning; and a short railway journey in addition brought me to the quaint old town of Goes in S. Beveland, where I found comfortable quarters at the principal hotel.

My first objective was to explore some of the coast-land along the West Schelde between Rilland and Fort Bath, a locality already known to me. It was here (on a previous visit) that I had met with my first spoonbill, besides avocets and other wading birds new to me at the time. The island of S. Beveland consists almost entirely of "polders," i.e., marshland considerably below sea level, which is protected by a rampart of high dykes. It is only by unceasing labour and care that the land already won is safeguarded from the encroachments of the sea.

Less than a year previous to my visit, the sea-wall near Rilland had been broken during a gale, and several thousand acres flooded, but of this there was little trace. The breaches in the walls had been repaired and the land restored to very nearly its former condition. My way led past little square cottages with green-shuttered windows and a long-legged sheep (kept for milking purposes) tethered beside each homestead. Here the soil consists of rich alluvial deposit from the Schelde estuary, growing in addition to the usual farm produce heavy crops of potatoes, maize and caraway. The latter crop was at this time of

year a mass of scented white blossom, fairly humming with bees.

In the course of my walk I met with a good number of avocets (all of them exceedingly tame) besides commoner wading birds. There were quite a wonderful number of mallard flying about, considering the time of year. These were mostly encountered on the extensive salt marshes which lie between S. Beveland and the mainland of S. Brabant. Some of the ducks were still flying in pairs; others in "bachelor" parties of drakes only, the ducks being presumably occupied with family affairs. On the whole, however, the number of birds seen in S. Beveland had not quite justified my expectations; so, acting on local advice, I resolved to transfer my activities to Zierikzee in the neighbouring island of Schouwen.

To Zierikzee I proceeded to voyage across the eastern arm of the Schelde, in a little paddle steamer carrying a pretty mixed cargo. The fore-deck was occupied by live-stock in the shape of several Frisian cows, while under an awning on the after-deck, a party of country people in their Sunday best were beguiling the trip with a plentiful supply of the local lager beer.

Having settled myself at Zierikzee, on the following morning I started out in an ancient vehicle hard to describe, except that it had four wheels and was drawn by a powerful black horse.

Our road of brick "pavé," raised on top of a high dyke, ran straight across country, and was bordered for some miles with a double avenue of

limes. On our way we stopped at a farmhouse to inspect a large heronry. Here, presumably for want of larger timber, the birds were nesting in a little group of low poplars situated right in the farmyard itself. Some of the nests were within a few yards of the farmhouse windows, and none at a greater height than fifteen or sixteen feet. Many of the trees looked too slight to carry the burden of big nests with which they were loaded.

A drive of a few miles further brought us to the second farm which was our real objective. Here there was a good-sized mere, a great nesting-place of gulls, terns, and all sorts of waterfowl. As we drove up to the farm we passed within a few feet of a number of oyster-catchers sitting all in a row on the iron hurdles that bordered the road, and having perfect confidence in our goodwill. The worthy farmer welcomed us into his best parlour, and having understood our wishes, at once expressed his willingness to take us out on to the mere "where the birds live."

Proceeding to the staithe we boarded the boat, a very crank narrow sort of punt, apparently made out of sheet iron; and having first dislodged from it sundry defunct fish of undoubtedly ancient lineage, we were soon being steadily quanted across the smooth waters of the mere. For some time few birds of any sort were to be seen. A few little warblers (strange to me, but which I suspected were Orphean warblers) were fluttering about the reeds, and now and then black terns would come skimming across the

water like giant swallows ; several pairs of sheld-ducks were swimming about the mere with the greatest unconcern, but that was all. Presently, however, we began to approach a group of islands upon which it was clear there was a considerable nesting-colony. As we neared the first island, cloud after cloud of birds arose, to be compared only to a snow-storm or a swarm of bees. In fact we seemed to have the whole bird population of the islands wheeling around us with noisy protests which were redoubled as we landed from the punt, until the babel of noise was deafening.

From the motley crowd descended a shower of droppings, causing me to bless the forethought of my Dutch friend who, before our embarkation, had insisted on providing me with a blue over-all blouse similar to his own. It was necessary to tread with the greatest caution to avoid crushing eggs or young birds, and amid such a profusion of nests it was well-nigh impossible to pick out the rightful owners from the whirling cloud of birds which surrounded us. My guide did his best to impart information. He would point to a nest here and another there, and then snatching at my arm as particular birds dashed by, he would say " zee starr " (sandwich tern), " aekster " (oyster-catcher), or whatever the name was. A large proportion of the eggs appeared to be on the point of hatching ; and young gulls, fluffy balls of mottled grey down, were scuttling about in all directions.

On the larger islands, which were crowded with nests, the black-headed gulls were most numerous

of all, but both common and sandwich terns were there in prodigious numbers. The black terns nested by themselves on a separate pool.

Oyster-catchers, curlew and ring dotterel were nesting on some of the smaller and less-crowded islands; and on the shores of the mere were numbers of avocets. These last do not nest on the gull islands (which are evidently too crowded to suit their tastes), but on the neighbouring marshes and polders; every acre of which seemed to hold its pair of nesting birds, either avocets or godwits.

While on the islands I had refrained from taking any eggs, fearing that I should find most of them incubated. Moreover my guide explained that he could let me have as many specimen eggs as I required, from his last gathering. Large quantities of eggs were collected by this farmer and marketed for eating purposes. My knowledge of Dutch was too scanty to follow completely the explanations which he gave me, but I understood that he worked on some system of his own, in accordance with which he made two gatherings of eggs for the market and then left the birds to finish their nesting operations in peace. On our return to the house he showed me some thousands of eggs (which would shortly be sent to market), the result of his last gathering; from these I was able to pick out a nice series, and some queer shapes and varieties of the commoner eggs.

The same evening, after an early supper at the hotel, I retired to my room and proceeded to over-

haul my treasured eggs, which thanks to the judgment of my friend at the gull island I found were quite fresh and accordingly easy to blow. The eggs of the black terns only were difficult, as the shells were extremely fragile. As the bedroom partition walls were only of painted canvas, I had some qualms of conscience that my egg-blowing activities would disturb a worthy couple next door. If this was so they certainly had their revenge, for when eventually asleep their snores seemed to shake the whole house.

Part of the island of Schouwen is bordered by sand dunes of enormous height and width. I have seen nothing in England to compare with them.

From Zierikzee I proceeded by boat and train to Amsterdam, where after a day or two spent in "doing" the usual sights (picture galleries and so on) I determined to explore the resources of the Naarder Meer.

Some twenty miles South-East of Amsterdam lies the little town of Naarden (or Oude Naarden as it is usually called). The old township was practically wiped out by the Spaniards in the War of Independence, but I have reason to believe that a modern invader would find Oude Naarden a harder nut to crack.

Naarden possesses a grand old church which has no claims to external beauty; but it is well worth inspection, as the interior is painted all over, beams, ceilings and all, with coloured frescoes.

But it was not to see the church that I had

come to Naarden that morning, but to visit the "Meer," a lake of some four or five hundred acres of water surrounded with dense reed beds, and especially interesting on account of the nesting colony of spoonbills which have their home there with many other aquatic birds.

Although, like herons, spoonbills would appear to have a natural preference for nesting in trees, on the Naarder Meer they build their nests on some flat mud-islands, for trees there are none. It is no doubt for this reason that the herons, which nest here, have located themselves in a large reed-bed ; not close to the spoonbill colony but at the North-West corner of the water. This heronry is a large one; the nests (like swans') are great piles of sticks and dead reeds and built up from water level. Compared to others of their kind, I found the spoonbills shy and silent birds (I cannot remember hearing a sound from any one of them). They were wheeling round at a good height, their spotless plumage glittering in the sunlight like polished ivory.

For the most part they fly with necks drawn back to the shoulders, though perhaps to a less degree than is customary with herons. Among other interesting birds which were nesting on or about the Naarder Meer were marsh harriers, black terns, and (I believe) cormorants, of which last we saw some numbers, but without discovering the whereabouts of their nests.

By way of shortening my journey back to Amsterdam and at the same time exploring some more of the marsh country near Naarden I started

to walk back across country in the direction of Weesp.

Here on various small pools I discovered several more nesting-colonies of black terns.

A few storks were also to be seen standing on the edges of the dykes or walking sedately about, presumably in search of frogs. The Dutch storks are rather dingy-looking birds, which perhaps is owing to their fondness for nesting on chimneys; at any rate they have not the spotlessly smart appearance of the spoonbills.

Black-tailed godwits were nesting on the marshes in abundance, each succeeding pair flying round, and escorting me with noisy protests to the boundary of their territory, when the hue and cry would be taken up by the next pair of nesting birds.

Here, while still close to Naarden, I was accosted by a veteran in uniform who suddenly appeared from a quite inconspicuous "dug-out," and asked me my name and business in at least four different languages (your Dutch official is nothing if not a linguist). He eyed my sketch-book with great suspicion, and informed me that the land I was on was "government" and sketching "most strictly forbidden."

I was then aware of certain innocent-looking grass-covered mounds in the middle distance; which I was given to understand were concealed forts for the better protection of the Realm.

However, my stern interrogator, when he found that I was English and that my offending sketch-book contained nothing more serious than certain

crude drawings of storks and godwits, appeared satisfied that, mad or not, I was at least harmless, and civilly directed me on to a marsh path leading in the direction of Weesp.





MAP OF PAGHAM HARBOUR.

CHAPTER XIX

CHOICE OF WILDFOWLING QUARTERS

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS—EFFECT OF THE GREAT WAR—
THE “ HUSH ” PORT OF RICHBOROUGH—PAGHAM
HARBOUR

UNDER the above heading I do not propose to discuss “ *seriatim* ” the rival merits of different wildfowling resorts. These are apt to alter rapidly in character, from various causes ; so that the ideal fowling-ground of to-day may become worthless in a year or two.

Accordingly my intention is rather to set down certain general considerations on this subject which suggest themselves to me.

It is not of necessity the wildest and most remote fowling-grounds that provide the most sport.

In fact a great deal of the best free wildfowling to be got in this country can be reached in a journey of four or five hours from London ; while even in the home counties there is a stock of wildfowl which would be a surprise to many. I know of several quite good shooting-grounds which are now closely neighboured by large seaside towns. In such neighbourhoods the presence of wildfowl in any number would seem incredible, until it is remembered what a very small proportion of the

usual holiday crowd either carry a gun or are capable of telling a duck from a guillemot.

The close proximity of a mining or manufacturing town is likely to prove a much more serious drawback. The British working man loves a bit of sport ; and wherever there are wildfowl to be shot at, he must be out and have a crack at them, however light the resulting bag. A seafaring population, too, will nearly always contain a good number of the wildfowling fraternity.

Many shooting-grounds excellent in themselves, having deservedly acquired a reputation for sport, have become such a " very Mecca " of wildfowlers, in short, so over-shot, that failing exceptional luck the actual dividend of birds per gun is small indeed.

In places where there is much punt-gunning it can hardly be expected that birds will be otherwise than wild and hard to get at ; and for obvious reasons the local punt-gunners may not look upon the activities of the shoulder gunner with too friendly an eye.

When it comes to a matter of choice, a small compact shooting-ground, provided that it is not over-gunned, will often be found preferable to a much wider range of country ; for it will be easy to take stock of the local supply of fowl, and make plans accordingly. Of course, the closer you can live to your ground the better.

Given on the other hand some vast acreage of ground where the birds—however numerous—are spread over a very wide area, you may well require a car to convey you about to the likeliest

places inland, or a motor-boat or sea-going yacht if working from the sea. Here it may be found hard to select any particular spot in preference to others ; and if the fowl are liable to persecution from many guns it will be especially difficult to foresee their movements.

In many wildfowling resorts great changes either for better or worse have been indirectly brought about by the Great War.

In places which happened to be included in certain specially regulated war areas the activities of all wildfowlers were practically prohibited for a period of some years ; no one being allowed to launch a boat or fire a gun without special permission from the Military Authorities. The result was that for the duration of the War a sort of truce of God existed in these places between gunner and wildfowl, to the vast encouragement of the latter ; the effect of which has hardly yet been obliterated.

In other quarters, however, there is a very different story to be told ; and the construction of flying and bombing-grounds, quays and factory settlements on what had formerly been remote and unfrequented wastes of marsh lands, etc., has naturally resulted in disturbing and driving away the local wildfowl.

A fowling-ground which has suffered considerably from changes of this sort is the neighbourhood of Pegwell Bay and the Sandwich Haven. The actual shooting-grounds were small, but not as a rule overshot, in spite of the close proximity of the town of Ramsgate ; and the sport at both

ducks and wading birds was quite good of its kind.

Here the construction, early in the War, of the celebrated "hush" port of Richborough, with its quays and wharfs, and the necessary dredging and deepening of the river channel, has had its inevitable effect. My last visit to Richborough a year or so after the War revealed a perfect scene of desolation.

The winding outlet of the Stour had been straightened and dredged, and the river banks, from Stonar well-nigh up to Sandwich itself, were lined with long quays and sheds, while the upper reaches of the river were choked with endless rows of transport barges.

The land all around was littered with heaps of barbed wire, corrugated iron sheets, and every conceivable sort of material returned from the Western Front and dumped. Still the birds seemed loth to entirely desert the neighbourhood; and I noticed a small island which was fairly brown with curlews and whimbrel.

To what extent the birds might become reconciled to the port of Richborough, were it left in its derelict condition, I cannot say. As the harbour has now been acquired by a large mercantile firm, in connection with the development of the Kentish coalfields, matters are hardly likely to improve from the point of view of sport.

Another fowling-ground which has had a somewhat chequered career (but in no way owing to the War) is Pagham Harbour, near Selsey.

During the earlier half of the nineteenth century,

Pagham enjoyed the reputation of being one of the best shooting-grounds on the South Coast, *vide* the well-known works of Messrs. Knox & J. E. Harting.

In 1870, after several abortive attempts, the sea was banked out and the harbour completely reclaimed. My first visit to Pagham was made on a blazing hot day in August, 1906. The outline of the original inlet could still be traced by the old banks ; but the harbour itself differed little from the surrounding fields and marshes. Everywhere the grass was brown and brittle with the drought. About a third of the harbour acreage was then under cultivation, root crops, etc. ; of the remainder a great part was pasture land, and there was a considerable rabbit warren. Out in the middle distance stood the old black hull of a ship which had been left high and dry, and now served the shepherd for a hut. Across the warren ran a magnificent hedge of tamarisk shrubs ; under cover of which I was able to walk within easy shot of a flock of curlews. In addition to the curlew there were more than a dozen herons, all presumably waiting for the tide to ebb, and in the meanwhile enjoying their midday siesta in the company of a few sheep. The line of the old deep-water channel which used to lead up to Sidlesham was marked by a chain of small reed-fringed broads, upon which sundry ducks, coots and dabchicks were disporting themselves.

Lying on the baking sand of the warren, with the sound of the sea and the piping of curlews and redshank in my ears, I could almost imagine that the old times had returned and that the harbour

was once again a waste of mud-flats and winding creeks. I little thought that in four years' time my fancy would become a sober fact, and the sea would be sweeping into the harbour again to reclaim its own ; but so it was.

The first big inroad of the sea came in 1910 ; not on the site of the old harbour mouth, where there is an enormous accretion of shingle, but towards the Selsey side, where the shingle-bank between harbour and sea narrows very considerably. So great was the force of the tide that barns and bridges were swept away, and the railway embankment at Sidlesham was cut clean through. Indeed, if it had not been for the solid obstruction of the Chichester and Selsey high-road, which at this point is strongly banked and well above marsh level, I cannot see what could have prevented the water from driving right through to Bracklesham Bay and for the time being converting the Selsey peninsula into an island.

In the following year the old sea wall on the north-east side of the harbour was broken and a large additional area of fresh marshes over-run by the sea.

On a fine morning in May, I walked down the bank from Sidlesham, to see the fresh " break." It was nearly full-tide, and the water was rushing like a mill-stream through a wide breach in the old sea-wall.

The flooded area seemed to extend for miles, and as one looked across the marshes the white tops of the may trees (in full blossom), just showing above the blue water, made a picturesque if some-

what desolate scene ; while little flocks of whimbrel and dunlin could be seen flying to and fro as if anxious to inspect their new territory.

To check further encroachment on this side, a new length of sea-wall, half a mile long, was built ; but over a hundred acres of good grazing land had to be abandoned and thrown into the harbour area.

The corresponding reach of the old bank, being abandoned to the full force of the tide, soon became gapped everywhere ; and large portions of it were entirely washed away.

The line it took can still be traced by a series of ridges and mud-islands, many of them still capped with long grass ; some of these islands now make excellent fighting stands for curlew, etc.

The harbour as at present consists of some 2,000 acres of mud flats intersected by deep, winding channels along which the tide runs with great speed and force.

During the prevalence of large tides the whole area of flats is submerged, but during the neap tides the higher parts of the warren are left above water.

It is to be feared that the harbour in its present state does not possess the same attraction for wild fowl as in the palmy days of Messrs. Knox & Harting.

This is possibly due to the great quantity of sand and shingle which have been washed on to the muds during the last few years. Nevertheless there is growing up in the deeper channels a heavy growth of wigeon grass, and should we be favoured

with a spell of real old-fashioned winter weather, both brent geese and wigeon may be expected to turn up in fair numbers.

Throughout the season the harbour muds are a great haunt of curlews, besides being visited from time to time by fair numbers of green plover, and other waders ; and at the times of spring and autumn migrations there is always a chance of falling in with some rare straggler from overseas.

Of the hawks, kestrels are common at all seasons ; they find a plentiful supply of mice and such small deer in the banks and hedges.

In mid-autumn they are joined by sparrow-hawks, which follow the migratory flocks of larks and linnets, etc. ; and with them come the short-eared owls.

Of these I have sometimes put up a dozen or fifteen in the course of a morning's walk.

In October, 1922, a peregrine falcon made his headquarters at the harbour for several days. His favourite prey seemed to be the pigeons that used to fly out on to the sands to pick up grit.

I came across the remains of several homing pigeons, the bones surrounded with a ring of feathers, showing where the falcon had made his meal ; while the numbered brass ring on one leg proved the victim's identity beyond doubt.

Once while rounding a small mud island, well out in the harbour, I flushed a large grey falcon from the edge of a pool, at very close quarters. What attraction he found there I could not imagine unless he was contemplating a bathe.

On another occasion I put up three pheasants from the very same spot.

Partridges, I know, will sometimes wander a long way out on to the saltings; but those pheasants were certainly a surprise.

Since the war there has sprung up on Pagham Beach quite an extensive settlement of holiday bungalows, etc. Consequently I fear that it cannot be long before the autumn shore shooting suffers from the attention of too many guns.

In mid-winter the harbour still remains comparatively quiet.

The neighbouring and more spacious waters of Chichester Harbour afford much wider feeding grounds, etc., for both wild fowl and wading birds. Here, however, the shore shooter is up against the conflicting interests of a whole fleet of gunning punts, which are launched as soon as the ducks and wigeon begin to arrive.

Until quite recently the town museum of Chichester possessed a large collection of birds (now destroyed or otherwise disposed of), which had been obtained in the first half of the last century. In spite of the age and bad condition of many of the specimens, I found the collection of great interest, as it contained a very complete series of wild fowl shot in West Sussex, and particularly on the adjacent harbours of Chichester and Pagham.

In order to preserve some record of the most interesting birds, in September, 1922, at which time the greater part of the collection had already been dispersed, I made note of the following :

Wild geese—Grey-lag, Bean, Pink-foot, White-front, one specimen of each.

Bernicle and Brent geese, two of each ; Eider ducks, two. White Stork, Crane, Bittern, one each ; Avocet, two. Spoonbill and Black-tailed Godwit, three of each. In addition there were several ruffs, dusky redshanks, phalaropes, and smaller wading birds.



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